

**RUTH'S MARRIAGE**

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# RUTH'S MARRIAGE

BY

CONSTANCE SMEDLEY

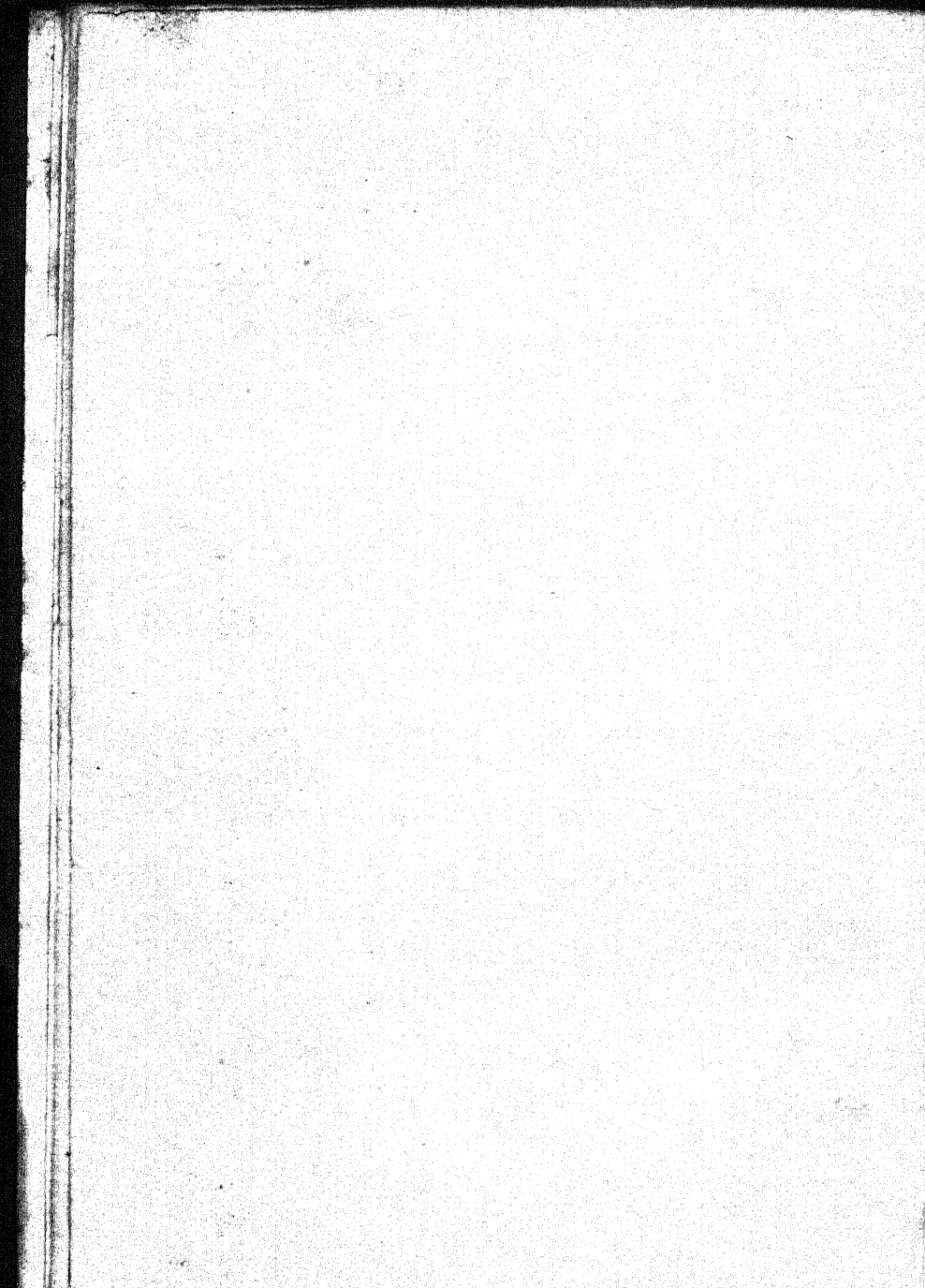
(MRS. MAXWELL ARMFIELD)

*Author of "The Emotions of Martha"*

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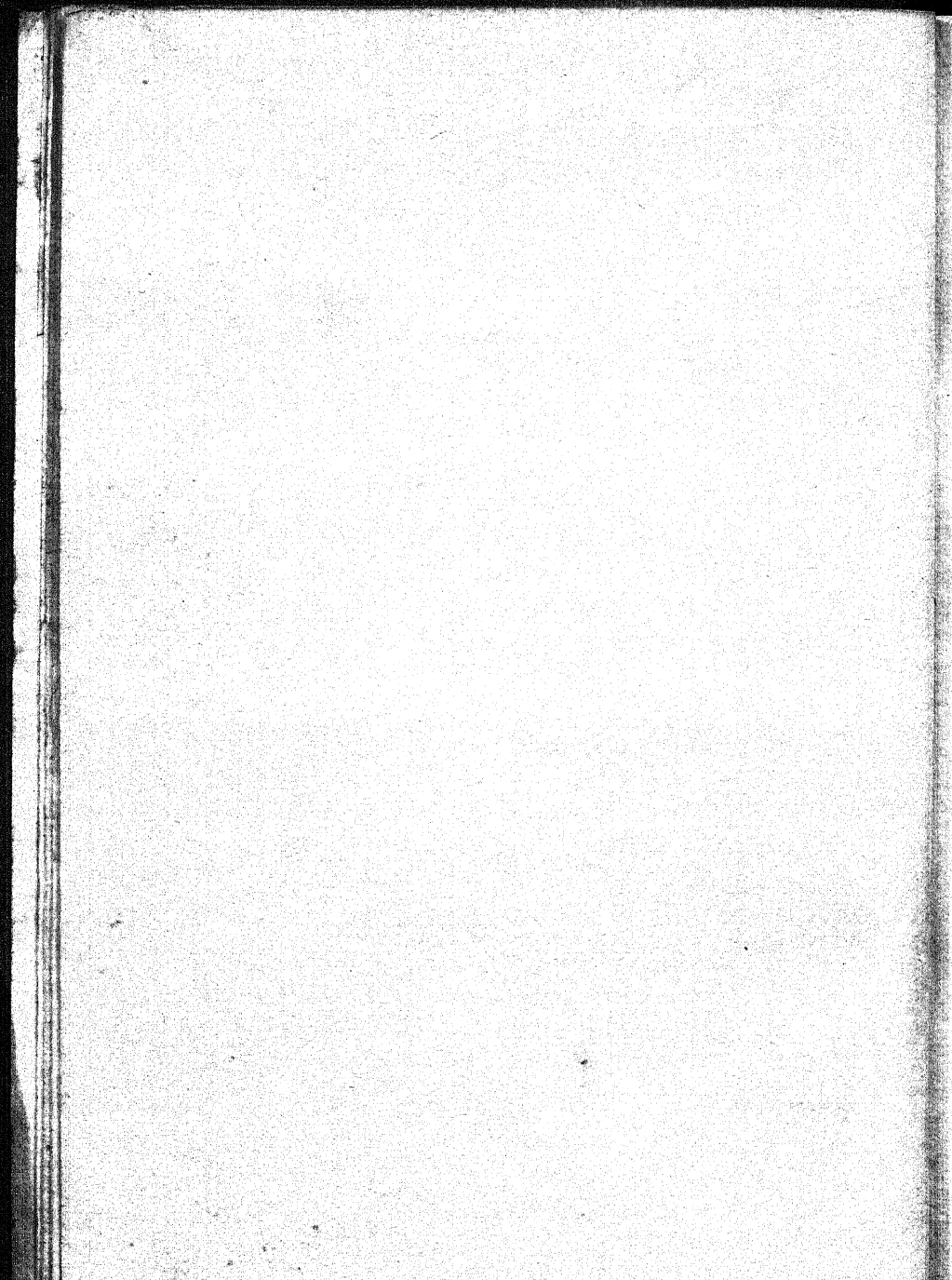


To

MY FRIEND

FLORA KLICKMANN

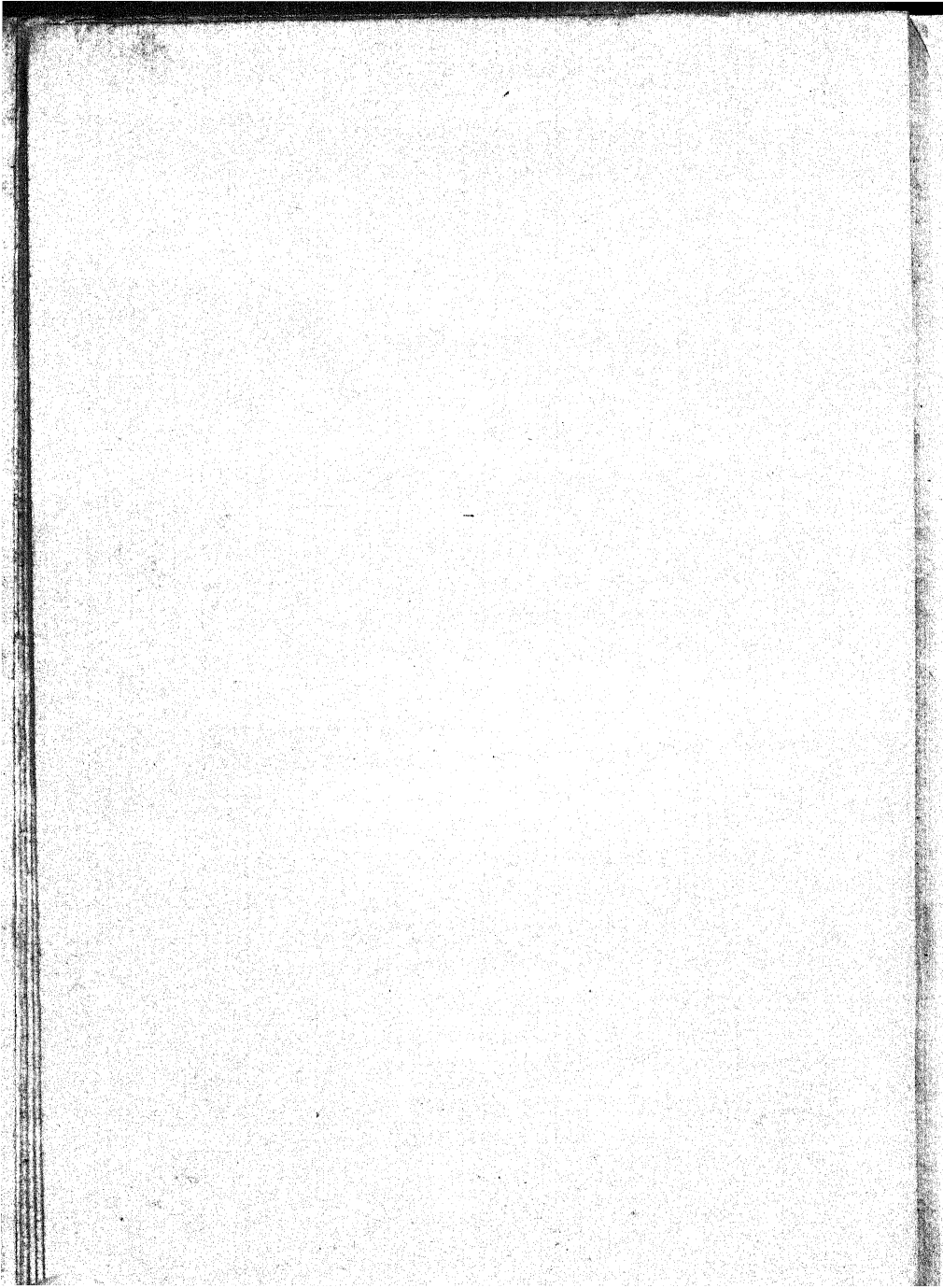
AT WHOSE SUGGESTION THIS STORY  
AND ITS FORERUNNER "THE EMOTIONS  
OF MARTHA" WERE WRITTEN



## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCING RUTH . . . . .	1
II. DOLLIE'S PLAN . . . . .	28
III. RUTH AND MARTHA . . . . .	52
IV. THE WEST-END SALESROOM . . . . .	82
V. A TÊTE-À-TÊTE . . . . .	108
VI. JOCK SPRING-CLEANS . . . . .	133
VII. VISITORS . . . . .	160
VIII. LOVE AMONGST THE RUINS. . . . .	182
IX. THE RED SEA . . . . .	210
X. WILL-POWER . . . . .	231
XI. A SHOPPING EXPEDITION . . . . .	252
XII. IN THE GARDEN . . . . .	281
XIII. THE DISHONOURED CHEQUE . . . . .	300
XIV. THE PROMISED LAND . . . . .	322





# RUTH'S MARRIAGE

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCING RUTH

A MIDDLE-AGED woman was coming along the road ; her air of inquiring observation betokened the tourist who descended upon Amesbury each summer to the wrath of its residents. She was cycling along in bland unconsciousness, however, and presently turned in at a gate set hospitably ajar, and wheeled up the long drive.

The beautiful old house that soon appeared increased the complacency of her expression, and bringing the cycle to a stop before the porch, the visitor jumped off, propped her wheel against the ivy, and gave a smart tug to the bell.

Then she viewed the well-kept lawns and flower-beds, the Jacobean wing and quaintly mullioned windows, and when a white-capped maid opened the door, turned and spoke with bright authority.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"I've come to see the fancy goods," said she. The maid stared.

"This is Spence's, isn't it?" said the visitor.

"Mr. Spence lives here," said the maid, raising an indignant chin.

"I thought so. I want to see the dresser-boxes," replied the visitor. "I'm over from Chicago, and when I read about your Village Industry I made up my mind I'd take in Amesbury and pick up some attractive souvenirs to take back with me. The paper said the dresser-boxes were typically English. A very pleasant spot you make them in, too. Directly I saw the photograph I knew I should find something unique here." She dived into a subterranean pocket as she spoke, and so missed the blankness on the parlourmaid's face.

"Here's Mr. Spence," murmured the maid, as if the situation passed into gravity by the announcement.

An automobile was sweeping up the drive; it whizzed, and stopped immediately before the door. The tourist met the gaze of a well-set-up country-looking gentleman descending from the car.

His gaze was withdrawn instantaneously as he encountered the inquiring eyes. Ap-

## INTRODUCING RUTH

parently he saw nothing but the porch as he approached to enter.

"Why, now, isn't that interesting? If I had time, I want to hear all about it as well as buy," said the visitor, including Mr. Spence in her remarks with an insistence that suggested scholastic practice. "I'd like to be shown around, but I have to catch a train, and so I can only get the souvenir."

"At the Institute," murmured the disconcerted and wholly inaudible voice from within the entrance.

Mr. Spence had drawn himself up and remained speechless.

"There can't be any mistake," said the visitor, on whose cast-iron consciousness was dawning the perception of a rather curious lack of welcome to a customer; and she glanced over the magazine pages that she had unearthed. "No; the Amesbury Industry. Here it is! with a description of the house and you, Mr. James Spence, J.P., President of the Amesbury Golf Club. I see your sticks," said the indomitable stranger, including Mr. Spence's golf-clubs in her busy smile. "Perhaps you haven't seen this yet? *Country Times*; this morning's issue."

"I certainly haven't," answered Mr. Spence.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

The parlourmaid had retired into the darkness of the hall; her white apron glimmered faintly from the distant shadows, indicating an awestruck waiting on events. Miss Briggs, teacher in the Chicago Primary Schools, was left confronting equally august authority.

"Well, if this paper be correct, you have a daughter you have every right to be proud of. She must be a very bright girl," said Miss Briggs, gathering speed. "I'm glad to encourage enterprise whenever I see it. I'm happy to see the business instinct extending to your women. They need it. So do ours. We are too inclined to concentrate upon the academic. From what I gather, your daughter and the other young lady, her colleague, are making this business pay. I forget how much the paper says they draw as salary from the net profits. Perhaps you don't need to have your memory refreshed upon that point."

"I do not," said Mr. Spence.

Even a woman who had been trained to concentrate on One Idea to the automatic exclusion of all extraneous and confusing factors, was arrested in her mental progress by the force of the atmosphere emanating from Mr. Spence. She paused, still inquiring, but with the air of one who was awaking to the



## INTRODUCING RUTH

fact that something beyond the immediate radius of her mission would have to be taken into consideration. Her interlocutor was agitated! Why?

Miss Briggs' spectacle-protected eyes grew dazed.

"Madam," said Mr. Spence, raising himself slightly, as if he had been accumulating force which it was necessary to keep controlled, "this is my private house. Any information which has been printed about me has been done so without my knowledge or consent, and in all probability is grossly inaccurate."

"You mistake me," said Miss Briggs, assuming a dignity which, if not as thunderous as Mr. Spence's, was still impressive. "I have not taken the trouble to come thirty miles out of my route to visit you, interesting as I am sure the privilege would be. I have come to buy the goods which your daughter manufactures and exposes for public sale. There is no mistaking that. Here is a price list and photographs of specimens. I shall be glad if I can be shown the dresser-boxes—the smaller ones, at seven shillings. I have not room in my trunk for large souvenirs."

"I know nothing about them! Nothing!" said Mr. Spence.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

The visitor barred the porch indomitably. The fury of his glance struck impotently against the severe insistence of the stranger's eyes.

"Am I to understand there is no Industry?" said Miss Briggs.

"There is certainly none here," said Mr. Spence, attempting to pass.

"You say, in short, this article is an entire fabrication," persisted the Avenger.

"I don't know what it says," hedged Mr. Spence.

"That can soon be rectified," said Miss Briggs.

Mr. Spence found himself staring at the obnoxious page. A photograph of his house graced the centre.

"It's this house," said Miss Briggs.

"Without my knowledge," blustered Mr. Spence. "Impudence!"

"Your daughter cannot have pursued the business unknown to you?" asked Miss Briggs, more and more alert for information on the ways of Englishwomen.

"No!" stormed Mr. Spence. "Certainly not. I tell you this article is unauthorised."

"But are those dresser-boxes to be obtained for seven shillings?" said the visitor. "I gather you do not approve; but that is not

## INTRODUCING RUTH

my business. I simply want those dresser-boxes. I forget if I told you I have come thirty miles——”

“You have told me, madam,” said Mr. Spence. “My daughter is interested in a work-room in the village, I believe, where the village girls pursue some sort of craft. She has taught them art needlework with the idea of—er, instructing and——”

“What address, please?” said Miss Briggs. “You will excuse me for not waiting, but I have a train to catch.”

Mr. Spence stood dumb; the keen grey eyes drew forth a mumbled word, reluctantly.

“The Institute.”

“I thank you,” said Miss Briggs, bending her head with austere courtesy; then the spare form hopped nimbly forward, ascending with a triumphant spring, the wheel shot out, and Mr. Spence was left in his ancestral porch, unaccountable for words or actions.

For while he had sheltered behind the fact that the work of the Industry was not carried on inside his house, the fact that the Industry existed was incontrovertible. That his daughter Ruth had started it, organised it, designed the work, even embroidered much of it with her own hands, was equally indis-

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

putable. And there, in the workroom at the Village Institute, at this very moment were the dresser-boxes, awaiting purchase, with Ruth herself in charge.

Ruth had trained the village girls as a pastime; then orders had begun to come and work was sent to local exhibitions; gradually the Co-operative Industry sprang up. The magazine description, with its awful consequences in the shape of the visit of Miss Briggs, was correctly founded.

Mr. Spence marched through the hall and looked into one room after another. No one was at home. Inquiry elicited the news that Mrs. Spence had gone down to the village, and he put on his hat again and strode down the drive to meet her. He was bubbling with a wrath which must be discharged on somebody. For Miss Briggs' visit had come as the sequel to an incident—almost incredible, inconceivable—in his own Golf Club.

Mr. Spence drew deep breaths as he passed down the road. The roofs of Amesbury rose in the distance. Generations of Spences had lived there; they occupied a patriarchal position to the village. A generation back the elder branch had migrated to a neighbouring county; but some years ago Mr. Spence had

## INTRODUCING RUTH

been able to lease the old home of his ancestors. His solicitor's practice had left him, on his retirement, with a comfortable income, and now he felt like the actual lord of the manor. To have his home invaded, his daughter patronised, his house set forth as an advertisement, galled him so that he could scarcely contain himself. The women at the cottage doors seemed to bob to him with less respect than usual. He averted his eyes, pretending not to see their salutations—he, who generally walked through the village like an affable sovereign, with a word for all.

When his wife's comfortable presence emerged from a shop door, he went forward with a sense of relief. She would understand the enormity of the offence, and that was something.

“ Well, dear, did you have a nice meeting ? ” said Mrs. Spence as she came up.

She was a brisk, high-coloured matron, dignified even in her coat and skirt of grey alpaca. It was not necessary to dress smartly ; everybody knew the Spences *were* the Spences. Mrs. Spence, in her plain country garments, looked on London visitors dressed out in current fashions much as Royalty might glance at the crowds lining the kerb round Buckingham Palace.



## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"No, I did not have a nice meeting," answered Mr. Spence, and took possession of the pavement beside his wife. "No; I most certainly did not. If it were not that there is no one there competent enough to arrange the finals for the Championship, I should never set foot inside the Club again."

"I thought something had happened directly I saw you coming," murmured his wife. The houses had ceased for a few yards, and a protecting hedge rose up beside them. "I'm going up to the Institute to meet Ruth. Could you walk on?" The question was put with becoming tentativeness.

"That Industry has got to be stopped," said Mr. Spence from between his clenched teeth. "We were fools to let it start; but it's gone far enough—much too far. What do you think happened at the Golf meeting? A motion was brought forward to order the new cushions from my daughter. They want the monogram embroidered, and old Grice suggested the Club ought to patronise a local person. Ha! My daughter—a local person!"

"Oh, dear, how unpleasant!" said Mrs. Spence.

"I had to sit there while they discussed the price. You can imagine my feelings."

## INTRODUCING RUTH

"I suppose they meant well," murmured his wife.

"Oh no, they didn't," snapped Mr. Spence. "They meant it as an insult. Old Grice was deliberately offensive."

"Mr. Jennings," murmured Mrs. Spence.

The Rector had loomed into view. He hailed them as he came up.

"Hullo, Spence!" cried he. "How do you do, Mrs. Spence? I've just been visiting your daughter. What charming work! I tell her and Miss Dollie that they are bringing fame on Amesbury. Have you seen the article in *Country Times*?"

"I have," said Mr. Spence.

"Very encouraging for them! They deserve all their success. Well, I must be going. I've got to see Grice about our concert."

The Rector's geniality did not move the cloud; Mr. Spence had a genius for finding food for indignation when his pride was touched.

"Hm," said he, almost before the Rector passed from earshot. "Did you hear that?"

"What, dear?" said Mrs. Spence.

"Why, the way he spoke of Ruth. As if she were a cottager. Visiting our daughter!"

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Oh, my dear, I'm sure he didn't mean that," said Mrs. Spence.

"Of course he meant it," said Mr. Spence. "You can't help recognising facts. If Ruth takes up the position of a shop-girl we can't expect people to see her as anything else. The point is—is it a suitable position for a daughter of ours to fill? I say, no."

"But we can't stop it now," said Mrs. Spence. "It would break Ruth's heart if all her girls were thrown out of work; besides, we have no control over Dollie. She would only take the whole thing over, and she's quite enough inclined to do that as it is, considering Ruth started everything, and even now makes all the designs. Dollie does nothing but the business part."

"And it's Dollie that's the cause of all the trouble," fumed Mr. Spence. "If Dollie hadn't pushed herself into the affair, Ruth would still have been sending a few little things to bazaars, and giving work to a handful of her Sunday School girls, as ladies do."

"Dollie is terribly energetic," said Mrs. Spence.

"I'm sorry to say it of a niece of yours, but she's thoroughly vulgar-minded," said Mr. Spence. "She hasn't an elementary idea

## INTRODUCING RUTH

of what a lady can do and what she can't. I don't believe she has any sense of shame."

"Of course Margaret's spoiled her," said Mrs. Spence. "We must make allowance for that."

They had turned into the High Street; the Village Institute reared its grey stone walls a few yards ahead. Several people were about, and the Spences ceased talking and approached the scene of trouble in dignified silence. The Institute stood back from the road, and Mr. Spence availed himself of the shelter of the garden fence and stood like a classic monument beside the porch while Mrs. Spence hurried in, in search of Ruth.

The church clock was striking six, and in a minute or two the workers began to trickle out—fresh-faced girls for the most part, with now and then an older woman. All bobbed and ducked and nodded as they passed Mr. Spence, and a slight qualm seized him at the sight of the contented well-cared-for stream. The Industry had come to mean a good deal to the villagers. When Ruth at last appeared, cool and smiling in her neat white gown, his conscience almost pricked him. The most irate of men could not deny the beautiful graciousness that comes from a pure and

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

selfless nature and refines every occupation its owner can indulge in. Ruth's ignorance of her father's wrath was disarming, too. The smile that lit her face on seeing him won a slight return in spite of the indignation Mr. Spence was endeavouring to keep at an effective pitch.

"This is nice," said Ruth, slipping her hand affectionately through his arm for the few remaining paces along the walk. "I don't often have the honour of being collected. It's the last touch to a perfect day. Nothing but good fortune has been flowing in ever since the morning post. Dollie said something terrible must happen before the day is out; she can't take good as natural."

"Hum," said Mr. Spence, who was now confronted with the obnoxious task of putting Dollie in the right if he poured forth what he had come to say.

"Why, what has been happening?" asked Mrs. Spence in her most soothing voice.

"The most splendid order from Parkinson's—the great London decorators!" cried Ruth. "They are offering us all the embroideries for a new line of furniture they are bringing out. It will give us a certain income, and that's so comforting; and then people have been in



## INTRODUCING RUTH

to buy and order all day, which shows the work-room is becoming known; and last of all, such a good article came out this morning in *Country Times*. Mr. Jennings brought it up to show us, and a customer has come already because of it. Such an interesting American. She bought a whole set of dressing-table boxes."

"Ahem," said Mr. Spence, clearing his throat with immense dignity. "She came to the house."

"She said so," answered Ruth. "The directions were a little misleading."

"Abominably so," said Mr. Spence. "What I want to know is, how that article got in? Who put it in? It is the first I've heard of it."

"Some one from the paper came one day, and Dollie saw him," answered Ruth, turning a startled glance towards her father. "Dollie mentioned it; but I really never thought again about it. I didn't know you would be interested, father, dear."

"Your father didn't like it coming out," said Mrs. Spence with warning gravity. "It is rather unpleasant to have our house mentioned."

"Photographed! There's a picture," blurted Mr. Spence.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"It is such an interesting-looking house," Ruth murmured.

"Probably ; but I'm not going to have it used as an advertisement," said her father. "Do you know what that woman asked ? To see the dresser-boxes. Coming to my house, and addressing me as if I were a salesman ! I've been a fool to let it go on as I have done ; but now it's gone too far, and it must stop !"

"Oh, father, dear !" whispered Ruth. Her face had paled ; wide-eyed, she looked ahead, as if seeking egress from the cloud that had suddenly arisen enveloping all her happy plans.

The promise of security that had passed that morning to the workers could not be dashed away because of a mistake. She saw in a flash that her father might rightly object to the old home being used to awake interest ; but the mistake was of such small import beside the livelihood of her dearly loved girls. The Industry now stood as a record of three years' tireless devotion from herself and Dollie. It could not be stopped, at the moment when their efforts bore fruition.

Yet Ruth was one of those rare products nowadays—a dutiful daughter. Her father's word had always been accepted as unerring

## INTRODUCING RUTH

law. She was glad to obey, glad to please him. Their wills had never clashed, for Ruth had always yielded, sweetly and meekly, laying down certain small desires and preferences because it was a pleasure to give up for those whom she loved.

But to-day, the issue did not concern herself alone. She stood in the relationship of a protector to a group who needed honest, happy work.

"Father, dear," said Ruth, "I don't want to displease you; I want to understand; you know I do! But why do you feel this about the Industry? I know a mistake like printing the photograph of the house isn't enough to make you want to stop anything that's helping people. Tell me; for I do so want to understand."

They had left the town and were in the quiet road that led up to the Spences', and Ruth put her hand into her father's arm once more. She refused to give up her right of loving him. He never meant his fits of anger; the best way always was just to go on as if everything was right, and then things generally came right. So Ruth's voice showed neither fear nor diminution of affection; only the desire to know his point of view.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

But a point of view that seems most inclusive when shot forth as a projectile against a rebellious antagonist, can strangely lack in reason when presented calmly.

Mr. Spence summoned all his intellectual processes to put the matter in an impressive light ; but even he felt it was hardly reasonable to close down an honest and successful Industry which reflected nothing but credit on all concerned, and was bringing no small revenue to deserving workers, simply because he disliked the idea of being connected with anything approaching "Trade." The subtle dividing line between art and commerce was growing uncommonly hard to locate in these modern days ; hobbies and philanthropic pursuits were evincing an insidious tendency to be put upon a business basis. It was also a proposition of no small dimensions to say how far an intelligent and gifted girl might go without "going too far." One could not mew up one's womenkind in drawing-rooms for ever. Both he and his wife were proud of their daughters' intelligence.

"You see, my dear, it has gone too far," said Mr. Spence, assuming a highly reasonable tone. "I have never been averse, as you know, to you and Martha developing on proper

## INTRODUCING RUTH

lines. We were glad to send Martha to London and keep her at an Art School, and even let her have a studio ; but then, she—er—merely used the experience for her development ; and now she has married, has settled down to a proper woman's life."

"Yes, father, dear ; but Martha gave up Art because she felt it wasn't her vocation. She didn't succeed," said Ruth. "She finished with it some time before she became engaged. But the Industry is a success, and I don't have to leave home to take care of it ; it's at our very doors, and we've known the girls who work there all our lives. I should be doing some work in the village for the village people, anyway, shouldn't I ? And embroidery and design is my one talent. One can only give them what one has ; but one must make the best use of that."

"I'm not objecting to your teaching the girls," said her father. "I'm most pleased for you to be a source of help. People like ourselves have a duty to the villagers. We must look after them and provide them with employment."

"I know you think like that," said Ruth, squeezing the arm she held ever so little.

"Yes, but wait a minute," said her father.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"We must look after them because we are by birth and education in a superior class, and we must keep up that superiority for their good. Anything that weakens our power and tends to put us on their level and diminish their respect for us, is bad for them. If they don't look up to us, we can't hope to guide them."

Ruth was silent; again she sought the horizon as if in appeal.

"Now, how can they respect you if you work amongst them, selling the work of your hands, just as they do?" concluded Mr. Spence, with what he felt to be most ingenious and unanswerable logic.

Still Ruth was silent.

"Well?" said her father.

Mrs. Spence's rosy face was worried; she looked uncertainly at Ruth. Her steady eyes removed her, somehow, from her father's reach.

"I was only thinking," answered Ruth, "that St. Paul said we were to work with our own hands, 'Not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an ensample unto you to follow us.'"

"You must not apply the Bible to people in our circumstances," said her father sharply.

## INTRODUCING RUTH

"Times have changed since then. For that matter, Paul was most punctilious about keeping up authority and obeying those set in high places."

"Yes, but he gave some commands for all," pleaded Ruth. "He said, 'If *any* man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed!'" Her voice rang out with thrilling clearness.

"I don't agree with you at all," said her father shortly. "Paul was a tentmaker; he mixed with people of his own station, and spoke to them entirely. Such commands were never meant for people like ourselves. You take the Bible much too literally."

"Oh, father, dear, it's meant for every one," cried Ruth, with laughter breaking through the cloud. "Think of Peter's vision; he had to learn that God was no respecter of persons."

"Of course the religious part is for us all," said her father. "I'm referring to the practical part. It's no good arguing. The fact is staring every one in the face that the Industry is rapidly turning into a commercial business. Why, didn't you say to-day you're taking orders from a London shop?"

"It would be all right if you merely or-

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

ganised the work for the benefit of the village ; then we shouldn't say a word, should we, James ?" struck in Mrs. Spence. "What your father so objects to is that you and Dollie are taking money from it."

"I object to a good deal," said Mr. Spence. "But I admit my objections are very much enhanced by the point your mother has just made. That a daughter of mine should sell the work of her own hands and keep the money for herself, or, worse still, direct the work of the villagers for her own profit, is distasteful in the worst degree. I know you have plans to build a club-room ; but it doesn't matter what you do with what you earn. The point remains, that you frankly draw so much for the work you do."

"It was Dollie's idea," put in Mrs. Spence. "I'm sure Dollie is entirely responsible. Ruth would never have thought of such a thing. You know she wouldn't, dear."

"Oh, I know it's not Ruth's fault," returned Mr. Spence.

They were going up the avenue ; the stately cedars spread their branches over the smooth-shaven lawn. It was indeed unthinkable that the daughter from such a house should be earning money in conjunction with a group



## INTRODUCING RUTH

of village girls. But Ruth was answering her parents—inconceivably !

“It was Dollie’s idea,” said she. “But I think it’s fair that we should share the profits, and the work isn’t a charity then ; we all draw a proportion according to the value of our work ; and don’t you think that is good for everybody’s self-respect ? ”

Ruth had stood out, unashamed, in open independence. She was differing from her father on an absolutely vital issue.

“Well, Ruth,” gasped her mother. “I couldn’t have believed it of you.”

“It’s Dollie’s influence,” said Mr. Spence in short, husky accents.

He walked as in a dream. It was impossible to believe that gentle, dutiful Ruth was flying the flag of anarchy. They had been used to warfare with Martha in her early days ; but the experience in London had chastened her immensely, and now that she was safely married, they held nothing but a dutiful impression. Still, one might possibly disagree with Martha even now.

But Ruth ! why, even this obsession of her village work had been built up with such gentle touches that it had made no encroachment on her household duties, or the family in-

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

terests; and this independence had grown up as imperceptibly as did every influence that came from Ruth; and was as unassailable. Really, the Spences did not know how to reply.

Her father sought protection in the certain weapon of his feelings.

"You hurt me deeply," he replied. "All that I have will come to you and Martha; to all intents and purposes, it is already yours. It is no small pain to find my daughter prefers to sell things like a huckster rather than to take what is my greatest pleasure to give. You know you can always come to me for anything you want."

"Oh, father, dear," said Ruth, blinking foolish tears away, but clinging to his arm with heroic persistence that all must be right when people loved each other as much as she and her father did. "It isn't that I want to be independent of you; but I do love giving so; and it's quite different when you give what you have earned yourself. I know you love to give us everything we want. But if I came to you to ask for money every time I wanted to help any one, it wouldn't be quite fair, somehow. I shouldn't like to come."

"I don't see why," said Mr. Spence, soften-

## INTRODUCING RUTH

ing a little all the same, before the brave eyes seeking his.

"You know, dear, we've always brought up Martha and Ruth rather differently from the way we should have done if we'd had sons," said Mrs. Spence. "I mean, we've rather treated them as if they were independent individuals, and they've had no brothers to give in to. We must remember we've always liked them to do things. I had great ambitions for Martha; and we both were pleased when Ruth's work was noticed at the Exhibitions."

"I don't mind how much her work is noticed," said Mr. Spence. "It's the sale of it that I object to."

"We were pleased when it sold at the Exhibitions though," said Mrs. Spence. "I do want to be fair to Ruth. We can't suddenly turn round and stop what we've been tacitly encouraging, or at least allowing; and such ideas *are* in the air. Look at Jock!"

"You are not going to hold Jock up as an example," cried Mr. Spence.

The analogy was certainly not fortunate. Jock, the newly married wife of their cousin Dollie's brother, was causing a sensation among her husband's relations that can only be described as catastrophic. For Jock was

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

still engaged in earning her own living, and Bob's position as her husband was felt on all sides to be an egregious anomaly.

Amesbury was an old-fashioned village in an old-fashioned county; the first wave of the unrest that surged in cities was only just beginning to reach it.

Jock's home was a cyclonic centre round which gossip surged. Her refusal to see callers or to visit in an afternoon; the conversion of the drawing-room into a work-room with a blow-pipe (her profession was Art Jewellery); the general administration of the household under her Bohemian hand—were still thrilling topics of all the genteel Amesbury drawing-rooms.

But up till now the Spences had spoken of Jock as an interloper from a distant planet. Now, must they face the fact that their own daughter Ruth was a similar subject of discussion?

The Golf Committee would go home and talk of the proposed cushions to their wives. Comment was inevitable. If, by any chance, Miss Briggs' visit leaked out, comment would swell; and had not Mr. Jennings been carrying the article in *Country Times*? Half the parish would have seen the fateful photograph by evening.

"Though I don't know but that you are

## INTRODUCING RUTH

not justified," said Mr. Spence, as all these horrors surged up in an overwhelming wave. "Yes; Jock is a very good comparison; and you see what independence and disregard of duty has grown into, *there*."

They were by the porch. Mr. Spence went forward with a quickened step. He must grapple with the problem free from the piteous, appealing face of his daughter. Affection must be firmly put aside. The dignity of his house and name was threatened.

"I'm afraid your father's very much upset," sighed Mrs. Spence, ascending the steps slowly with her daughter. "I'm sure I don't know what to say. It isn't as if only you were in it; there is Dollie. Your father can't do anything to her."

Ruth nodded, mutely. Dollie was indeed a factor in the proposition. Encouraged by the splendid day, Dollie had unfolded a plan that afternoon which even then had left Ruth breathless. Now . . . !

"Development! We must always keep our mind on development!" Dollie had said. That was what Ruth's parents had instilled into her.

"It is difficult," said Ruth, with sudden and unusual passion. "If you've been trained all your life to develop, you can't suddenly stop."

## CHAPTER II

### DOLLIE'S PLAN

"I SHALL only need two rooms," said Dollie. "I can have a gas-ring in the bathroom and cook on that, and put a board across the bath for meals. Then I shall only need a tiny bedroom, and the other room can be given up entirely to the work. Just imagine what it will mean to have a London showroom."

"You can't have a showroom without an attendant," said Ruth.

"I shall be the attendant," cried Dollie. "You don't suppose I'd let anybody else sell the things or see the people? No! I shall have my desk and sit there and do the accounts and write the letters in between."

"But it will be so uncomfortable," said Ruth. "You'll have nowhere to see your friends."

"I don't want to see any one who hasn't come on business," Dollie answered impa-

## DOLLIE'S PLAN

tiently. "I only live for business now. I dream of it; I think of nothing else. I'm bored to death when people talk of other things."

"That doesn't seem quite right," Ruth hesitated.

"Of course it is," cried Dollie. "You must concentrate if you're to get on in this world. I tell you there's no limit to where the Industry will grow. We'll open a place in London first; but I mean to have branches in every city in the world. Eastern embroideries go everywhere; why shouldn't English ones?"

Dollie swept out a triumphant hand; she stood in the centre of Ruth's bedroom, tall and springy in a crisp pink muslin gown. Her shining hair was tied with a black bow, her eyes sparkled with confidence, her features were as firm as if they had been carved from ivory. The glow of youthful health shone in her cheeks; for Dollie Harvey was nineteen, and had never known anxiety or illness all her life.

She never tired herself with thinking, either; her shrewd and capable perception of all things immediately within her orbit was satisfied with mastering material problems.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

Business delighted her; she liked the concrete activities of buying, selling, organising. Now that a definite order had come from a London firm, Dollie's ambition leapt sky-high. Local success became insignificant at once; suddenly she appeared to herself as a giant penned in a mere village. Stories of men who had made fortunes were buzzing into her brain; why should not she exploit her cousin's talents and win fame for Amesbury and Ruth and herself? With such immense energy within her, she could not stay content with the small daily sales and orders, with their modest profits.

Dollie looked over Ruth's head and met her own reflection in the mirror. She seemed to herself the incarnation of capable activity, and viewed the lithe strong lines of her slim figure appraisingly.

"I'm as strong as a horse," said Dollie, with immense complacency. "I always have been able to do the work of three people. Think what that will save us up in London when there'll be such an immense number of customers to talk to, and letters to write and people to go and see. I shan't even have an errand-boy. I shall need exercise. I shall take the parcels round myself."



## DOLLIE'S PLAN

"Oh, dear," said Ruth, and buried her face in her hands and held her forehead tightly, for really it did seem as if a garden hose at full cock had suddenly sprouted from the floor and was bursting over everything. If she could have conceived the effect this London order would have produced, she would have destroyed the letter before Dollie had caught sight thereof. She had told Dollie how her people felt. Both had had to face Mr. Spence and employ all their powers of persuasion and argument; but now a temporary respite had been gained, the plan of going to London had bubbled up again, and apparently possessed Dollie to the exclusion of all interest, or indeed power of comprehension, of Ruth's feelings or affairs.

"I shall have to draw rather more," ran on Dollie. "But it won't be taking more, because we can put it down as rent. I should think we could get a big room in a good street for fifty pounds a year; and I could live on almost nothing."

"But, Dollie, wait a minute," said Ruth, pulling herself out of the basket-chair and going over to the window-seat. She needed air. "What will Aunt Margaret say?"

"She can't say anything," said Dollie in

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

triumph. "I shall simply tell her the Industry demands it; we shall pay for it ourselves."

"You can't leave your mother by herself," pleaded Ruth.

"I should leave her if I was going to be married," said Dollie. "Look at Martha. She's left you all and gone to live in Hampshire; yet because she's married, no one would dream of feeling aggrieved or lonely."

"We do miss her," murmured Ruth.

"Oh, well, I shall miss you and mother," said Dollie. "But duty beckons me, just as it beckoned Martha."

"But is it duty?" said Ruth, and turned bravely to meet Dollie's indignant toss.

"Really," said Dollie, "I get tired sometimes of pushing you along." She stalked over to the dressing-table and gave a pat to her hair. Ruth made her lose her temper. "A dead weight," thought Dollie. "No one but me could have got on with such a drag. Oh, if only she had a little imagination."

Ruth's imagination was fixed on other things than bank accounts and shoals of customers at this moment. She was seeing Dollie and herself in relation to their families, and she was wondering if her father had not

## DOLLIE'S PLAN

had some reason for his strictures after all. Not for his feeling about the business side ; Ruth kept her vision very clear from all taint of pride ; but wasn't he right in feeling that the Industry threatened to play too big a part in the girls' lives.

"It ought not to be everything," said Ruth, half to herself ; and then held up her head and looked across the garden with thoughtful, earnest eyes. "Listen, Dollie," said Ruth, with the firmness that came into her voice at times when she was very sure, and which gained even Dollie's difficult attention. "I don't want to desert you or the Industry one bit, nor to discount all you've done for it ; but I do think this plan of opening a London showroom needs more thought than has been given to it yet, quite apart from whether it's desirable for you to go and live there by yourself. First of all, are we in a position to launch out ? The order from Parkinson's isn't absolutely definite ; they say the furniture is an experiment, and they may stop the work at any moment. Besides, after the cost of the materials and the girls' wages have come off what they're paying us, there won't be much left ; and we have to pay rent and coal and light for the room at the Institute."

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Which all proves that we must enlarge our trade," said Dollie, with invincible assurance. "The expenses of the work-room are the same, however much work is done there."

"Yes; but I have to design and supervise the work," said Ruth. "And it's taking all the time that I can give. If you go away, there'll be much more for me to do here."

"We must train a girl to take my place as secretary," said Dollie.

"That will mean another salary, though," said Ruth.

"We shall make fortunes when we've got a London showroom," cried Dollie. "If we sell to people here, think of the thousands there'll be flocking in every day, from a good street. We must be prepared to extend enormously. I'm not sure that we oughtn't to take on more 'hands' now, so that we can get them trained ready for the rush when we open. The Christmas season will be here in no time."

"But we don't need fortunes," pleaded Ruth. "We ought to keep some of ourselves for our homes and people."

"That is a miserable argument," scoffed Dollie. "When I set out to do anything,

## DOLLIE'S PLAN

I do it as well as I can, quite regardless of my family! We're not amateurs; we are business women."

"Very well, then; as business women we haven't had enough experience," said Ruth promptly. "We can manage the Industry as it is, and it is enough of a responsibility for us. But we ought to be content with the success that comes naturally. If it grows quietly, we shall be able to meet the needs as they arise; but I don't feel able to turn out the quantities of work you say you'll need, and keep it good. It's far more important that the girls should do good work than that we should make fortunes; and I can't look after more than we have at present. I know I've all that I can do."

"The matter with you, Ruth, is that you're a coward!" said Dollie, white with mortification. "But I've set my mind on going, and I will go." She clicked the hair-brush on the tray and faced Ruth with the expression that hurt Ruth far more than any insult Dollie liked to hurl at her.

Ruth was stung sometimes; but her love for Dollie was too deep to let the hot words rankle. The thing she minded was the growth of that dangerous possession—will. It was

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

impossible to stop Dollie in any project she determined to carry out. So far, she had always managed to grasp what she desired; but looking at her now, Ruth saw that Dollie herself was in a grasp—the tight hold of self-will; and where that propelled her, could not be to happiness or peace.

Ruth knew when words were useless. She merely looked at Dollie for a moment, and then rose and put her arm round her cousin and kissed her as if nothing had been hurled at her.

"I'm not a coward, Doll," said she with a simplicity that smote Dollie's conscience, "We just don't see things quite in the same light. I've got to go to post. Come down to the village with me."

"You must own it is rather aggravating to be always checked," said Dollie, with a restored good-humour that was meant as a sort of apology.

"I like to think things out," said Ruth quietly, as she put on the pretty shady hat and drew her long gloves above her elbows. Ruth's glove-box was quite an evidence of character; no soiled gloves found entrance there, and yet there was always a supply, fresh and dainty, for every possible occasion. Everything that belonged to Ruth was spot-

## DOLLIE'S PLAN

less ; everything was pretty ; and yet she was one of the simplest dressed girls in Amesbury.

"As a matter of fact," said Dollie, when they were out in the September sunshine, "I want to leave home for another reason. This family trouble is getting on my nerves. Mother thinks and talks of nothing else but Bob's unhappiness. Of course it's awfully worrying ; I'm as sorry for him as I can be ; but there Jock is, and I can't see that we can do anything. When a man's married, he has to be left to it for a time. I tell mother the best way is to leave him alone until things get so bad they have to separate."

Dollie stuck her chin in the air with her most nipping expression. Ruth winced.

"Oh, I'm sure things will get better," she said earnestly. "They've only been married three months, after all."

"Well, my dear, if they aren't happy now, they never will be," cried Dollie. "And they can't be unhappier than they are ; at least, Bob can't. He came in last night at half-past eight, after he'd waited an hour and a half for dinner ; as it still wasn't ready, he came over to us. Mother was crying like anything after he'd gone. It's really too heart-rending ; nobody could stand it."

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"But why wasn't dinner ready?" asked Ruth.

"Oh, Jock had let the maid go out for the afternoon, and she hadn't come back," said Dollie.

"Jock can cook, though," said Ruth. "She used to get dinner when she lived in London; Martha and I went to her studio one night."

"She was busy with an order that had to go off," sniffed Dollie. "And so Bob had to wait—till he'd had enough of waiting."

"What did Jock do for her dinner?" asked Ruth.

Dollie shrugged her shoulders.

"I believe the maid came just as Bob left," she said. "He was too angry though to wait; naturally."

Ruth walked on for a few steps in silence. She was wondering how Jock had felt. Jock was different from Amesbury girls; she was Irish, but she was sensitive. Ruth had an uncomfortable vision of her delicate face with the haunting eyes and silky hair that was always tumbling down, and gave her a gipsy look. Jock possessed as much self-will as Dollie, only Dollie blazed when she was set on doing anything, and Jock plodded stub-



## DOLLIE'S PLAN

bornly along and smouldered. But Jock suffered most; one could see that in the tragic lines that were already graven on her face.

"Jock hasn't any friends or family to go to here, however miserable she is," said Ruth. "She must be having a worse time than Bob."

"Why doesn't she alter, then?" asked Dollie. "It's she who's making all the unhappiness through sticking to her work all day instead of looking after her house and Bob."

"Don't you think people sometimes get into a rut?" said Ruth, in her simple, earnest way. "When they've taken an idea into their heads, they don't seem able to get rid of it, sometimes, nor even to see that the idea is causing all the trouble. I think Jock looks as if she's in a fog, and is groping."

"She's the only person in Amesbury who doesn't see the cause of her troubles, then," said Dollie, with another shrug of her shoulders.

"But she doesn't see," said Ruth firmly. "She believes in the idea of economical independence that she's always preached to us, and she's sticking to her work because of her convictions. But a woman can't have a home unless she gives some time to making it; and Jock hasn't wakened to the importance

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

of home. We ought to remember she's never had one since her father married again. Ten years of homelessness makes a girl lose touch with ordinary life."

"Bob married her to give her a home," cried Dollie. "You'd have thought a girl like that would have been so grateful, she'd have tried her best to learn, specially when mother's been such an angel to her and was only too anxious to teach her to do everything the way Bob liked. Why, mother went over every day at first, and now she sends them flowers and vegetables twice a week and had the maid up to our kitchen for cook to teach her how to make Bob's favourite dishes."

"Yes, I know Aunt Margaret has been very kind," Ruth murmured doubtfully.

"I should think she has!" said Dollie. "She's never made the faintest objection to Jock, though heaps of people would have been horrid if their only son had wanted to marry a girl who'd led that sort of life."

"My dear Dollie, Jock's a lady," said Ruth. "There's no disgrace in being one of a large family, and having to earn your living."

"Still, she has lived a very Bohemian life by herself in London, with all her relations

## DOLLIE'S PLAN

in Ireland," answered Dollie. "They don't seem to have any family-feeling either. None of them came to the wedding. I never was at such a one-sided affair. I should think Jock felt awful with none of her people to take an interest or wish her joy."

"Oh, she is lonely!" cried Ruth in a sudden spasm of understanding. "Dollie, I think we've been horrid to Jock. We never go near her."

"Well, she never comes near us," answered Dollie. "We're quite as busy as she is; why should we take off time any more than she?"

"We ought to have time to help people," said Ruth.

"But Jock won't be helped, that's the trouble," cried Dollie. "Mother only wants to help her. She was willing to devote all her time to training Jock in housekeeping and social things. Now I'm so busy with the Industry, mother has no one to go out with, and she would have taken Jock about like a daughter. I don't know that I should have quite liked that; still, Jock has refused all mother's offers, and the only dignified thing we can do is to let her alone."

"Perhaps, after having had a studio of

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

her own all these years, Jock has ways of her own in housekeeping," Ruth put forth timidly.

"But such ways!" said Dollie. "Mother says she has no idea of proper food. If Jock had her way, they'd live on nothing but tinned lobster and onions—which disagree with Bob most dreadfully. She orders everything in tins, which is most extravagant, really; and at the same time she has the most extraordinary dishes, like tripe, and pigs' feet, and things no decent people would have inside the house. Mother says she's ashamed to meet the butcher. What the tradespeople are thinking I can't picture."

"There's no need to," said Ruth, with a very slight stiffening of her slender figure. "The food Jock orders is really her own affair."

"That's just what it isn't now, though," answered Dollie; "it's Bob's: and he's growing so thin, mother's quite concerned. I'm sure I don't know what will happen!"

"I think Jock looks unhappier than Bob," said Ruth.

Dollie glanced into the grocer's window with apparent preoccupation.

## DOLLIE'S PLAN

"Oh, well, I've had enough of it," she replied. "It will be a relief to get away. Nothing gets on your nerves more than watching a situation you are powerless to alter."

"If we hadn't been so taken up with the Industry, we should have thought about Jock and done things for her and welcomed her in a different way," Ruth persisted. "It comes to this, Dollie. For the last year we've been thinking of nothing but the Industry, day and night, and we've let friends slip away, and we've got out of touch with our people, and we really haven't extended any sort of friendship worth having to a girl who's come amongst us an entire stranger and unused to all our ways."

"But she doesn't want us," flamed Dollie. "She's refused to see callers."

"She may want to manage her house herself," answered Ruth. "She mayn't like tea-parties; but when Martha first brought her down to stay with us, and you and I weren't giving so much time to work, we liked Jock ever so well, and she liked us, and we went walks together and got on splendidly. But now we're all too busy to see or even think of one another, and I don't believe that's right."

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"We ought to make the best use of our time," cried Dollie.

"Jock thinks she's making the best use of hers by working twelve hours in the day," said Ruth. "But she's used up the time for making people happy. And we all ought to keep time for that. There's no better way of spending time than in making people happy."

Ruth's face had lightened as with revelation. The problem that had been worrying her was solved, to some extent at least. It was good to work, but one should work in moderation. When business or profession usurped all the waking hours, one became immersed in selfish interests—yes, selfish ones, centring as they did round one limited activity. It was worth while to give space and time and care to flowers in a garden; did not its beauty and power of resting and refreshing depend on them?

"I'm beginning to think there's something backboneless in your family," was Dollie's unexpected answer. "Martha gave up Art: now you're threatening to give up the Industry."

They reached the post office as Dollie spoke the bitter *dictum*; they could not

## DOLLIE'S PLAN

well continue the argument arrested in mid-pavement, so Ruth contented herself with a shake of her head and laugh as she ran up the steps.

Dollie gave herself up to cynical meditation, whence she was roused by the sight of Ruth with a letter in her hand.

"Isn't it beautiful?" said she. "Michael has been lent a studio flat in London for a month, and now he can take Martha when he goes up to do his commission. You know he's had one for a portrait group. Some one saw the picture of Martha in the Wood that was in last Academy and made a note of his name, and wrote last week to ask if Michael would do a portrait of his little girls. Martha will love going up to London with him."

"It will be nice for me too," said Dollie, somewhat mollified. "It's always a good thing to know people when one first goes to a place, and Michael must make the showroom known to all his friends. Martha will be useful in that way, too."

"If it's started," murmured Ruth.

"It will be started," answered Dollie.

"They want me to join them," said Ruth, suppressing the fear of Dollie's displeasure

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

with instant action. "I should love to go. I haven't seen Martha since she was married, and London is so much nearer than her home."

"But you can't go if I'm going," Dollie gasped. "You can't, Ruth; it's impossible. Who'd look after the Industry? Who'd send up the work?"

"Mary Perrott," said Ruth. "She's quite capable as long as there's nothing new to do."

"But I shall want perpetual novelties," said Dollie, becoming positively anguished. "Ruth, you couldn't go back on me; you simply couldn't! After we've had to face your people and calm them and defy them and have gotten our own way and been allowed to go on, you can't give in, and leave everything in the hands of Mary Perrott."

"Martha needs me," said Ruth. Dollie met unwavering eyes. "She wants me," repeated Ruth with a wealth of tenderness that showed the Industry had not usurped her only sister's place in her affections. "And I want to see her, badly. Martha's had to leave all of us and go and live in a strange place; and even though everybody has been lovely to her there, still it isn't like being with



## DOLLIE'S PLAN

her own people. She wants to have me with her, and I'm sure mother and father will let me go. Perhaps they will come up too for a few days. It would be lovely if they could."

"You're inhuman!" said Dollie, in a tense voice. "Heartless! How can you look forward to leaving when you know what I'm feeling?"

"Why not stay yourself? then everything would go all right," Ruth answered.

"Stay when I've made up my mind to go!" said Dollie. "Stay, and miss the Christmas season! You don't seem capable of realising the simplest *sense*."

Dollie marched along, too angry to say more. When one had made up all one's plans, they could never be changed—never; she would carry them out through every obstacle; yet, oh *how* annoying were the obstacles of other people's plans and wills!

"A mere whim," said Dollie to herself through her clenched teeth. "Is my one definite purpose to be blocked by every idle caprice that comes into Martha's head? Never. Ruth may give in tamely; I shall go on—and through!"

At this moment Dollie felt a gentle touch

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

upon her arm and awoke from her fierce broodings on her life-motive to the realisation of an approaching couple.

"Jock and Bob," Ruth whispered.

Jock was in her old frieze suit; she wore no hat, and the wind blew the rings of hair into strands about her face. Bob's arm was tucked behind hers, affectionately. The autumn dusk veiled the lonely road; the lights of the village were beginning to twinkle in the distance. They had recognised the girls, and came up in a leisurely, confident way. Nothing appeared wrong with their relationship as they strolled together. Fondness and protection were evident in Bob's every movement; he gazed down on the rough head which scarcely reached his shoulder like the most satisfied of lovers. Jock looked happy too. The tired lines had not wholly faded from her face, but in her shy, silent way she seemed to be enjoying the company of Bob and the dogs.

They paused when they came up to the girls with easy salutation; nothing seemed farther from their thoughts than family discord. After a few moments' friendly chat they passed on.

A happier expression was in Ruth's eyes

## DOLLIE'S PLAN

as she and Dollie came up to the Spences' gates.

"I'm sure it will all come right," she said. "They're in love, Dollie; and they'll work out the problem in their own way if they can only be left alone, and loved."

"I'm quite willing to leave them alone," said Dollie. "And I'm extremely fond of Bob. I don't pretend to like Jock; I've never thought her a suitable wife for Bob; and the fact of their being out a walk on Saturday afternoon doesn't alter my opinion. I'll admit he is still infatuated at moments, but I still say the infatuation is steadily wearing off; and all the sentimental desires we may have for their happiness doesn't alter fact. You may be twenty-three, Ruth, and I twenty, but I'm at least ten years older than you in experience and general common sense. No, I won't come in; I'm going to tell mother about my London flat this very night, and have it definitely settled. There's no need to tell your people it's to be our London show-room, unless you want to. It's my affair; not theirs."

"Well, we'll see what Aunt Margaret says," Ruth murmured.

"I've never failed to convince her reason

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

yet," said Dollie loftily. "Besides, she's so worried about poor Bob, I don't believe she has the strength to hold out. Good-night, Ruthie. *Do* try to keep firm."

The injunction was unnecessary. As Ruth walked along the avenue, whose trees met overhead, and at whose end the lights of the great house glimmered in welcome, she was seeing her path more clearly than she had done for months past.

There were higher interests in life than accumulating money, or even the power of bringing others money. A sense of duty to the village, and loyalty to Dollie's untiring energy, had threatened to swamp other duties and loyalty of equal, nay, of even greater importance.

"Martha will help about Jock," thought Ruth, and turned towards her sister with the old yearning love and trust in Martha's courage. Martha had been Jock's fellow-student; Martha had brought Jock down to stay; it was at Martha's studio Bob and Jock had met.

Moreover, Michael had known Jock in her student days; he and Martha belonged more to her world; they were in touch with the artistic London which was so far removed from Amesbury.

## DOLLIE'S PLAN

And both of them were so big-hearted, and both of them loved Jock. Oh, Ruth was sure that, somehow, Michael and Martha would help to put things right. If for no other reason, it was worth while going up to see them.

The Industry had diminished to infinitesimal proportions in Ruth's consciousness. She had awakened now to the needs of—some one else : the some one else whose eyes had been haunting Ruth for ever so long.

“Oh, God, let me help people,” prayed Ruth. “Let me help in the best way. Teach me the best way. Keep me steady. Keep me loving. Keep me awake !”

### CHAPTER III

## RUTH AND MARTHA

"It's so bewildering to think of you as married," said Ruth.

"I don't feel any different," said Martha, "except happier every minute. This studio is what is bewildering me. How are we going to keep it clean!"

"I haven't been able to take in anything but you," Ruth answered, turning her eyes away from Martha and looking round the vast room with growing wonder. "What a collection! I don't think I've ever seen so many beautiful things in my whole life."

"I've never seen so many things of any sort together in one room," said Martha. "Who's going to dust them? If I'd known we were coming to a museum, I wouldn't have let Jennie go on her holiday. As Mr. Fowles is Michael's friend, I thought their tastes would be alike."

"But you couldn't have better taste than

## RUTH AND MARTHA

is shown here," said Ruth. "Come and look at this cabinet. I don't believe there is more lovely china in South Kensington. Here's some of the William and Mary blue-and-white ware. A whole dinner set. And the Spode? And what's this? Mason! What do you mean by saying it doesn't show good taste?"

"I meant, taste in living-rooms," explained Martha. "We keep our china in the pantry, and use it; and if you hung up Chinese coats and Persian carpets on our walls, our rooms would be completely spoilt. I do want you to see our house, Ruth! Even the floors are carpeted with cream matting, and the hills and garden look in at every window, and the only ornaments we have are flowers, all growing and springing. This place feels stuffy, I can hardly breathe. There's too much of everything. If you could cart three-quarters of the things away, you could begin to see what was left, though then there'd be too much!"

Martha had not lost her impetuous air, for all the dignity of six months of married life. She seemed exactly the same Martha who had stormed and cried and made mountains out of molehills, though the shadows

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

had flown from her eyes and her despair was as much play as earnest now.

"Oh, I do like to see the old you peeping through the new you," laughed Ruth, taking Martha by the shoulders and giving her a shake. "All the more, because you don't mean it now. How you used to moan at Fate!"

"Oh, don't bring back the silly past," said Martha, screwing up her face in humorous distaste. "Though I suppose the old point of view does hang about still. Do you really think the two of us can keep this Loan Collection in order, *and* the flat, and cook the meals, and have a holiday? That's what we asked you here for; and now this studio has dawned upon me, it doesn't look as if you're going to get much of one."

"I came up here to be with you," said Ruth. "And the flat's nothing! Two bedrooms, a tiny kitchen, bathroom, and this one room! We shall have finished everything, including all the dusting, by ten o'clock, and the meals will be no trouble on that gas-range."

"I really am longing to experiment on that," confessed Martha. "I can't do what I want at home with Jennie popping in at any minute. She has promised to come back if I find we



## RUTH AND MARTHA

need her ; but I didn't like the idea of you or her sleeping on the divan and having no corner you could feel was truly your own. You can always make room in a house, but a flat is so dreadfully definite."

"That's the price of compactness," said Ruth. "I'll love helping with the work. I never enjoyed myself so much as the week I spent with you in your studio. That was near here, wasn't it."

"Yes, in the unfashionable quarter, though," said Martha. "This is what Dollie would call a good street. What do you think of her arrival? Michael says she must have patience, for building up a London business may mean years of waiting."

"Dollie is picturing London flocking in," said Ruth, rather seriously. "She seemed confident that the good street was the only thing that was needed, and now she has got rooms in one."

"Where is Thimble Street?" asked Martha.

"Close to Sloane Street," answered Ruth. "Dollie says that's one of the best shopping districts."

"Sloane Street's all right," murmured Martha; "Elliott Dove used to shop there. But I can't remember ever seeing Thimble Street."

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Dollie has taken furnished rooms," Ruth answered, "because a flat in that neighbourhood was impossibly expensive. She wanted to be right in the shopping centre."

"It's a funny idea," said Martha, glancing at her watch. "Well, I must go out and do *my* shopping if we're to have dinner. Shall you be all right here, or will you come too?"

"I think I'd like to begin dusting," confessed Ruth. "To tell you the truth, I'm longing for an excuse to have those precious plates in my own hands. They're dusty enough to excuse them being cleaned, don't you think?"

"You must be very careful," said Martha seriously. "Michael says Fowles only lives for his collection."

"Isn't he an artist?" asked Ruth.

"I suppose he'd call himself one," answered Martha. "He doesn't do any work. His people are very rich and give him a huge allowance, and he roams about the world now, enjoying himself."

"Where is he now?" asked Ruth, setting a plate on the table with tender fingers.

"Oh, quite near: Mount Street," said Martha. "His people have taken a house there until Christmas; and as his father's ill,

## RUTH AND MARTHA

his mother wanted him to stay with them and act as host: she entertains rather a lot. She's very clever, and knows the smart artistic set."

"Where do they generally live?" asked Ruth.

"The father has a big place in a manufacturing centre in the Midlands," said Martha, rather vaguely. "They aren't an old family. I believe the grandfather made all the money, and the father has always been delicate and lived shut up with his books. The mother is the one who travelled and brought Fowles up. I believe he's spent most of his life abroad. I don't really know him; I met him once or twice when I was in London, at Elliott Dove's studio. I expect we shall see him here; he's very fond of Michael, and, oddly enough, Michael is of him."

"Why 'oddly'?" persisted Ruth. "He must know a lot and have a great love of beauty; and he must be nice, too, to have lent his studio with such treasures in it."

"Oh, but, my dear, he's the kindest-hearted person in the world," cried Martha. "I'm not running him down, am I? At least, I didn't mean to. I didn't take a violent liking to him when we met, because he seemed

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

egotistical; but I value Michael's opinion far more than my own, and Michael says he's really a good sort. They've been friends now for fifteen years, so Michael ought to know; and one mustn't judge people by their manner. Now, are you sure you don't mind my going?"

"Not a bit if you don't mind finding me in an old frock when you return," Ruth answered, brushing her skirt vigorously as she spoke. "I never saw such dust; in these few minutes I have become covered."

"Ah, that's London," said Martha, with the superiority of one who has spent a year and a half in a Chelsea studio. "I've brought up the pinafore I used to wear at the Art School."

"I borrowed two of Jennings' aprons, the biggest she had," Ruth smiled. "And I'm going to tie a handkerchief right round my hair. I insisted on tucking in my gardening frock, though mother was horrified at the idea of wearing it in London; but I can't spoil my new morning-gown."

"Won't you wait till to-morrow morning?" said Martha, from the bedroom.

"I'd much rather start now, as there's nothing particular to do," said Ruth. "Then we shall be done in good time to-morrow and

## RUTH AND MARTHA

can go out. You're sure Michael won't be back till dinner-time ? ”

“ Yes,” said Martha, emerging in outdoor attire. “ He's gone to the British Museum, and is going on to Regent's Park at five, to arrange about the sittings. We've a long afternoon before us, and as I've got to shop and set the things out on the kitchen shelves, perhaps it would be as well for you to get this room cleaned. The flat must have been shut up for some time, by the state it's in.”

Martha returned home some time later, to pause on the studio threshold before the apparition of a young lady of smart and totally unfamiliar appearance, who, posed authoritatively on the divan, was supervising the labours of an extremely busy serving-maid.

“ Oh, here's Martha,” said the apparition, looking up ; and the figures resolved themselves into Dollie and Ruth.

“ I do believe you didn't recognise me,” said Dollie, undulating across the floor to Martha and kissing her with the suavity of a society matron.

“ What have you been doing to yourself ? ” said Martha.

“ Waking up,” said Dollie ; and Martha, looking at her closely, saw that the apparently extravagant attire was only a very

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

new-fashioned tailor-made suit, and the hat was amazing because of the enormous size of the bow and wing that graced it.

"Well, how are you getting on?" said Martha, a little patronising in her turn, for Dollie had been in the schoolroom for some years after Martha had come out, and in Martha's eyes was still in the ratio of a school-girl to a married woman.

"As well as I expected," said Dollie, recognising Martha's attitude, and pert in consequence.

"We must go and see the showroom, Martha," said Ruth, peeping out in an irresistible manner from beneath the turban-like arrangement which bound her pretty hair.

"See it, my dear!" cried Dollie; "I expect you to be in it every afternoon. I've planned an immense campaign on the buyers of every West End firm while you're here. I can't leave the place for long in case any one came in; and so I've had to wait till you came up before I can really start the serious part of the business."

"But, Dollie, I couldn't face the streams of customers alone," gasped Ruth, quite scared. "I shouldn't know what to do; I get so confused by crowds."

## RUTH AND MARTHA

"Oh, there aren't streams," said Dollie, in a rather funny voice. "I mean, not at once. London people never come in crowds—that is, not to the best shops. Of course the showroom is in an awfully good street."

"Where is it?" said Martha, genuinely puzzled. "I can't remember seeing Thimble Street up anywhere."

"Of course it's in a *very* fashionable quarter," said Dollie, with immense patronage. "It's one of those smaller streets that provincial people never hear about."

"Isn't that rather a pity?" said Ruth, pausing in her rubbing.

"Oh no," said Dollie. "If once the Industry became popular, we could never hope to build up a smart business. I've learnt a lot since I came up here."

"How long have you been up?" asked Martha, unpacking her basket on the studio table.

"Six weeks: it seems like years," said Dollie. "Oh, dear, I am glad you've come, Ruth. We can do so much more together. It puts heart in one, somehow, having someone to consult with."

"But I don't know anything about business or smart people," said Ruth, very concerned.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"I can't take charge of the showroom, Doll. I should be overwhelmed."

Dollie hesitated; the glowing pictures she had sent home, and the need of preserving prestige before Martha, made it difficult to reassure Ruth convincingly. While she cast about for a method that would calm Ruth's quite unnecessary fears, and at the same time maintain dignity, Martha struck in as gently as she could, but with distinct authority.

"Dollie, dear," said she, "Ruth is going to help me with the flat. My little maid has gone for her holiday so that Ruth can have her bedroom."

"So Ruth's been saying," answered Dollie. "But she says she'll have finished everything in the morning, and I only want her in the afternoons."

"Yes; but she's come up to be with us," said Martha. "For a holiday."

"There's no work in sitting still in a room all afternoon," said Dollie.

"Ruth wants to see all sorts of things," said Martha, piling vegetables together with great care. "She's come up for a change."

"Oh," said Dollie. "Oh, I see!"

She remained dumb on the sofa, her absurd hat and skirt and shoes combining to give her a helpless look. Ruth was continuing



## RUTH AND MARTHA

to dust and rub and sponge the treasures on the chest, now used as side-table. Martha had completed her survey of her purchases, and was collecting them, preparatory to carrying them into the kitchen. Dollie looked what she felt—out of it.

“I won’t stay, as you’re busy,” she said, attempting great self-possession and appearing more forlorn than ever. “I shall be glad to see you any time you can come, Ruth. Give my kind regards to Michael, please.”

“You’re not going,” said Ruth, dropping her duster.

“You must have tea. I’m just going to get it,” cried Martha, turning midway to the kitchen, the picture of dismay. “I’ve bought the loveliest cake.”

“I felt in the way,” said Dollie, becoming suddenly natural. “Both of you seem so different. The Industry used to be everything to Ruth; I expected her to come round directly she got in. I couldn’t believe it when half-past three sounded and she still wasn’t there. I had to come round; and then, to find her calmly dusting an old dinner service that you aren’t even going to use!” Dollie dabbed her eyes with an infinitesimal handkerchief, reduced to open tears.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Oh, Dollie, I'm so sorry!" cried Ruth, all penitence. "It never came into my head that you'd expect me the first day."

"That's the awful part," gasped Dollie.

"Have you had any lunch?" asked Martha, with sudden recollection of the effects of such forgetfulness in student days.

"No," murmured Dollie. "I was waiting to show Ruth the flat. I thought she'd come each minute."

"Sit right down and take that hat off," commanded Martha. "You shall have something in ten minutes. Don't talk or think another word about the Industry till you've had something. Come and make coffee, Ruth. Dollie doesn't care for tea."

"I was an idiot," sobbed Dollie; "I forgot that people who don't live in London want to see things. When one lives in London, one never does. I w-would like some coffee. I feel so queer and funny."

"Don't think about a single thing but the omelet you're going to have in half a jiffy," called out Martha, beating vigorously; but in the privacy of the kitchen her eyes met Ruth's significantly, and she murmured, "Dollie's starting nerves."

For a moment, however, Dollie's need was

## RUTH AND MARTHA

a good meal, and one was soon set before her and heartily partaken of, to Dollie's own surprise.

"I had no idea that I was hungry, I was so on edge," she confessed. "London makes one jumpy; didn't you find that, Martha? I never lost my head at Amesbury."

The "nerves" had not yet developed alarmingly. Dollie recovered enough, indeed, to comment on the cut of Martha's costume and offer to take her shopping.

"One must get everything in London," she said. "And Ruth must not wear that housemaid's dress; supposing anybody came? Any one might! It isn't even a smart print dress. I never saw such a skirt; and long sleeves, too! You might at least cut them off at the elbow."

"It's clean and neat, and I don't mind being countrified," laughed Ruth, who had returned to her beloved china, and was now polishing the last shelf's contents—quaint old "Mason" figures. "If any one did come, they'd think Martha had a treasure. I don't know any one in London, so I've nothing to be careful for."

"Everybody should be careful of their dignity," said Dollie, rising now in a final

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

fashion. "When a woman is properly dressed she can do anything. I feel at ease in the showroom whoever comes in. Put on your best coat and skirt when you come, Ruth, dear. One mustn't dress up, exactly: smart, but plain, is the right standard."

"She is a cure," said Martha, when Dollie had withdrawn her imposing self. "She looks just like the girls you see in Jay's or Peter Robinson's; she has the same sort of ducal air."

Ruth was laughing, too, amidst her genuine fondness for Dollie, and, oddly enough, the compassion which Dollie had aroused.

"She looks worried," said Ruth. "I can't understand that, for nothing ever daunts her. Even father doesn't awe her; she was absolutely undisturbed when he said the Industry must stop, and argued with him as if she were herself a lawyer. He couldn't help being amused, though he was angry; and she won, in consequence. But to-day there was something queer beneath the airs."

"She'd had no lunch," said Martha.

"Yes. Perhaps that was it," said Ruth, doubtful still, however.

"Well, I must prepare dinner before I change," said Martha. "Is that all the light available? The room seems dark."

## RUTH AND MARTHA

"The shades are heavy," said Ruth, "and these lamps only light up spots. There's another one over there, but that only gives light to its own niche."

"I'm used to heaps of light," said Martha. "I remember, studios are usually twilighty. Thank goodness, the kitchen's bright. Haven't you finished?"

"No; I've got to clean the cupboards now," said Ruth. "It won't take long to put the china back when that is done."

Martha disappeared into the kitchen; presently the electric bell made Ruth start violently.

"Oh, Martha," said Ruth, pausing on the chair where she perched, dusting upper shelves.

"It's only the cream," called Martha, reassuringly. "They promised they'd send it. You might take it in. I can't open the kitchen door even; I'm up to my elbows in flour."

Ruth did not trouble about her appearance; a little hall opened from the studio, and she ran down it and opened the front door.

Instead of the urchin or tradesman she expected, her amazed eyes encountered a young man in the most correct of calling clothes.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Mr. and Mrs. Keene at home?" said a supercilious voice.

"No," said Ruth, scarcely knowing what she was saying, and still unable to take in the vision. From the top of his glossy hat to the tips of his patent-leather shoes, the visitor displayed the perfection of a fashion-plate. Such a tail-coat, such a waistcoat, such elegantly creased trousers, Ruth had never seen.

"I'll come in and wait, then," said the new-comer, and before Ruth could realise what he was doing, he had come through the open door, pulled off his gloves and laid them with his stick and hat upon the table and had strolled into the studio with an air of familiarity which made Ruth's cheeks flame.

"How rude!" thought she. "How unutterably rude!" She followed indignantly, glad that the kitchen door was closed. She must slip in and warn Martha.

But before she could cross the room, her steps were stayed.

"Good gracious! you haven't got my Spode and Mason out," said the stranger; and with a leap of her heart Ruth knew that this was Mr. Fowles. "What *are* you doing?"

The anger in his tone was so great that Ruth caught at the chair-back.

## RUTH AND MARTHA

"I've been washing it," said Ruth.

"Oh, my goodness!" groaned Fowles. "Why didn't I give orders for the cupboards to be locked? But who could have conceived that my china would be pulled out the first hour? Put it back at once, and don't touch anything upon these walls, whether in cases or cabinets or stuck about."

"Not dust?" said Ruth.

"My good girl, I ask it as a favour," said Fowles, and again the colour flamed in Ruth's soft cheeks. Never had any young man spoken to her in such familiar tones in her whole life. Even her Cousin Bob had not assumed such autocratic possession. She came up to the table with added dignity and lifted up the things; her hands were trembling.

"Take care, take care," said Fowles.

Ruth could not answer; her heart was swelling as much with disappointment at being forbidden charge of the treasures as with humiliation at the lack of trust his air implied. Added to which, the implication of unwarranted intrusion hurt her sorely.

"If you please, mayn't I dust the shelves before I put back the china?" said Ruth, in an almost indistinguishable murmur, as the state of the cupboard met her eyes.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Is it as bad as that?" said Fowles.

She felt him coming up behind her and bent her head. The merest trace of some exquisite perfume permeated the air: then she felt a touch upon her shoulder.

"Let's look," said he, and pushed close beside her to inspect the shelves. "It is pretty bad," said he. "Yes: you might dust. Look sharp, and I'll put back the things."

His voice was as remote as his appearance. Ruth dusted, with burning cheeks. The experience was still breath-taking.

"Now, you can give the things to me," said Fowles, "And do be careful not to drop them. I'll put them back."

Ruth handed the china to him.

"How nicely you keep your hands," said Fowles, when several ornaments had been transferred. Ruth was forced to stay with the objects of attention held out, as if for inspection. He looked for the first time at the lowered face.

"How do you do it?" said he. "They're as white as mine."

"Will you please take this?" said Ruth, trying to avert her face in vain.

"I didn't mean to be rude!" said Fowles.



## RUTH AND MARTHA

"I was really interested. I didn't know a girl could do housework and keep her hands nice. D'you put cream on them?"

Ruth could not answer. The way in which her attempt to protect herself had been passed over was more humiliating than anything. She felt his eyes still bent on her. Then as he put out his hand, rather slowly, for the ornament, she withdrew hers—too soon. The figure crashed upon the floor.

"Oh!" said Ruth, and stood transfixed.

"Now, you see!" said Fowles. "D'you know that was priceless? That's the only specimen of——"

Ruth had gone down on to her knees: something in her attitude struck him: a beaten, wholly beaten air.

"Oh, but you mustn't mind as much as that," said he. "It was as much my fault as yours." He dropped to his knees also: it was as he suspected. Tears splashed upon the fragments. "More so," said he, with a rush of something he had never felt in his whole selfish life: something amazingly like understanding! "I'd kept you holding out your hands. You got tired."

"I was angry," faltered Ruth.

"Angry! Why?" asked Fowles, rising

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

coolly, with the collected fragments. "What had happened to make you angry?"

Ruth, in her turn, rose: something in the lift of her chin made Fowles pause. He looked with growing wonder as she took up a jar from the table and held it out to him. In spite of her apron, her tied-up hair, her dusty hands and face, the grace of her manner was even more unusual in a servant than the softness of her hands.

"My dear girl," said Fowles, "you are really rather a little touchy."

His voice had softened: he was feeling a distinct liking for this novel housemaid.

"I suppose you were put out because I was annoyed about your cleaning the cabinets," he continued. "But you see one thing has been broken, hasn't it, already: and though I can get it riveted, I can't run such risks, can I? Of course you didn't know the value. I really am not angry. Only you mustn't do it again, see?"

He bent his head to look into Ruth's face: she lifted it proudly and met his eyes as she gave him the last piece. Somehow, their fingers touched. Fowles' hands stayed still: the puzzled feeling was growing: who was this girl? Where had he seen the same

## RUTH AND MARTHA

precise, firm oval of brow and chin, the same pure contour of the features? This girl was fair, with soft hair that escaped from the fine handkerchief: the eyes that met his, almost defiantly, were of a deep grey-blue. But still, she reminded him . . .

"Oh, Mr. Fowles!" said a familiar voice from the depths of the studio, and Fowles and Ruth started, and caught simultaneously at the falling china, to hold it and each other's hands together in one quick clasp. Then Fowles was left with the ornament intact, and with Mrs. Keene!

"Why, Ruth! Why has she flown like that?" said Martha, coming forward unembarrassed, with her pinafore over one arm. "I didn't hear you come in. I was busy getting dinner. You have the most perfect kitchen, indeed the flat is like Aladdin's palace. It is good of you to have lent it us. Michael will be in pretty soon."

"But I don't understand," said Fowles, leaning against the oak chest, rather faintly. "Who did you say that was? Your—your friend?" He nodded towards the door behind which Ruth had vanished.

"You mean my sister, Ruth. She's come up to stay with us. She and I are going

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

to take charge of your things, so you ought to feel at ease about them," answered Martha brightly. "Ruth has pleaded for the responsibility of your china. She is looking forward to living with it: she loves beautiful things even more than we do."

"Good gracious!" said Fowles, in a funny low voice, and still leant against the chest as if paralysed. "My dear Mrs. Keene, I can't think, I simply can't think what I've been saying; what I've done. I . . . I must tell you! You'll have to explain! I took your sister for . . ."

Martha had drawn herself up ever so slightly.

"It is impossible to explain," said Fowles, and turned blindly to the door. "Tell Keene I'll hope to see him some time. You will excuse me, won't you, but I've a very important engagement!"

"Certainly," said Martha.

A growing horror held her riveted. Fowles' manner and Ruth's flight combined to suggest—oh was it possible?—he had insulted Ruth! It did not matter for whom or what he had mistaken her. A man who could insult a girl was doomed in Martha's eyes. She held out no help, therefore, but stood rigid, the

## RUTH AND MARTHA

faintest inclination of her head greeted his adieux.

Martha went to find Ruth. She had taken off the apron and handkerchief, and was brushing the cloud of soft corn-coloured hair.

"My dear, what has happened?" said Martha without ado.

"I can see now, he took me for a maid. I didn't understand. I never thought," said Ruth from the shelter of the cloud. "It was most silly of me not to think: but everything happened so quickly."

"What?" said Martha, with a thumping heart.

"Putting the china back," said Ruth, pushing her hair from the white forehead. "Oh, Martha, I let something fall and he says it's irreplaceable. What shall I do? What can I?"

"Is that all?" gasped Martha, clutching the bedstead, overpowered. "Oh, Ruth, I thought—I can't possibly tell you what. I've let him go. He thinks I'm furious because he took you for a maid."

"Of course he took me for a maid!" cried Ruth, indignant, not with Fowles, but with any possible accuser of that gentleman. "How could he do anything else? Oh, how

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

silly I was. Why, I remember now: he asked for both of you and I said that you were out. I meant Michael: I was so astonished I hardly knew what either of us was saying: and then, directly he came into the room, he saw all his china laid out on the table."

"Oh dear, he didn't mind?" cried Martha.

"He didn't understand," said Ruth, holding her hair unconsciously in two big strands and looking to Martha's sisterly eyes, like a mediæval angel. "Oh, Martha, it has been unfortunate. He will feel awkward."

"Well, it's rather awkward for us," said Martha, sitting upon the bed.

"It's much worse for him," said Ruth, with a vivid recollection of certain looks and words. "I can't see how he can ever come here again. Oh, Martha, and he's Michael's greatest friend."

Suddenly Ruth's eyes fell on the little hands that held her hair: suddenly mirth danced into her eyes: suddenly, she dropped her hair, caught up the brush and brushed and laughed and laughed.

"He asked how I kept my hands white?" she laughed. "If I put cream on them? Now, Martha, how can we help him, ever, to live that down?"

## RUTH AND MARTHA

"We must ask Michael," said Martha, in a tone that suggested the difficulty was already halfway solved.

It was, more nearly than they knew. Fowles, stumbling blindly down the stairs, had met Keene at the bottom. His explanation was coherent, Keene's laughter reassuring. But there and then Keene insisted on his return, straightway.

"You've got to get it over," said he. "It's always a mistake to give misunderstandings time to grow. Ruth won't be half as formidable as Martha. She'll be much too sorry for you."

"But you don't know what I said," groaned Fowles. "Or how I said it."

"My dear chap, the more insulting you have been the more profoundly she'll be pitying you, and realising your shame," said Keene, chuckling irresistibly. "You don't know Ruth!"

Fowles was conducted, therefore, to the scene of expiation; and sat waiting, ridiculously strange and ill-at-ease in his home, while Keene discovered Martha, now busy changing, in their bedroom.

Ruth and Fowles seemed destined to continue their acquaintance unconventionally;

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

for, ignorant of his arrival, Ruth, in her white evening gown, came in before Martha could emerge, and stood, again nonplussed, as Fowles rose up from before the fire. But, as Keene had said, Ruth was only conscious of his feelings. Neither ever knew which spoke first ; but somehow Fowles was stammering an apology.

"You do understand?" said Fowles. "You will do just what you like with anything I have. It's too good of you to want to clean them."

"In spite of the risk?" said Ruth, with unfeigned gravity.

Fowles was lost in contemplation of the eyes raised to his.

"I do hope you'll break something else," said he.

Ruth's startled expression made him conscious that his meaning was, possibly, not clear ; he could not tell her that his collection had been the sole thing that he cared about, and now he offered it to her with a vague idea of sacrifice. He would be glad if she broke the things he valued most, so that he could experience the joy of giving something up for her.

Vaguely, he felt this implied something



## RUTH AND MARTHA

he could not yet express ; and so said coveringly :

"It will do me good. I'm growing fussy. Men who live by themselves do, you know."

"I like people to take care of things," said Ruth.

"But I don't ; I only hoard mine," said Fowles. "You're going to take care. I'm much too selfish, too idle."

Ruth's eyes denied the accusation ; the bedroom door was opening.

"Oh, Ruth's here," said Keene.

"Yes, and there's no need to say anything more about the mistake," said Ruth, with the firmness that occasionally astonished her relations.

"You're going to stay to dinner. It doesn't matter about changing," said Keene, coming up to Fowles.

"I should like to, very much, if I may telephone," said Fowles, abandoning a dinner-party without a hesitant regret. "Are you sure Mrs. Keene won't mind, though?"

"She sent the invitation in what I can only call a noble manner," said Keene, with a twinkle. "It's her first experiment. I'm sure it will be delightful."

"I must lay the table," said Ruth, awaken-

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

ing to her new duties. "Now where do you keep your silver?"

"I haven't any idea," said Fowles.

"His man waits on him like a tender parent," laughed Keene.

"May I open your kitchen cupboard?" asked Ruth.

"You are covering me with confusion," answered Fowles. "I am going to retire to the hall and telephone. I could not face the position if the forks aren't clean!"

The silver, duly discovered, graced the table-cloth when he returned, and dinner followed soon.

Afterwards they sat round the fire and talked. When Fowles got out into the street he was astonished to find that it was after twelve. He walked home, wondering at himself. It was a long time since he had so thoroughly enjoyed an evening. Possibly the homelike atmosphere proceeded from Martha's sewing. One scarcely ever saw a woman sew in London! It was refreshing also to meet capable, domesticated girls. How quietly the excellent dinner had been served. Nobody commented; one ate in peace, and talked of other things. The things had been cleared away as unostentatiously,

## RUTH AND MARTHA

A simple evening—standing out like a peaceful oasis, from the social whirl in which Fowles eddied.

“They’re clever girls, too,” thought he, “if they did the work that girl in the queer little room in Thimble Street showed me. I must look in again, and ask her more about their Village Industry. They’re just the sort of women you can picture helping the poor in a beautiful and gracious way. I must interest my mother. I’m glad I went.”

He walked on, looking forward to the day after to-morrow, when he had invited the Keenes and Ruth to dine with him at his favourite restaurant. He wondered if the girls would stand out in its brilliant setting. Certainly they had looked charming in the studio.

He fell asleep that night to dream that Ruth was holding his hands tightly and would not let go, though he was dragging her down a precipice.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE WEST END SALESROOM

A NOVEMBER afternoon did not improve the appearance of deserted pavements and smoke-begrimed houses. Thimble Street was one of those poor relations which occasionally make an appearance in fashionable thoroughfares. The inevitable green-grocer's shop graced a corner, a dairy, a newsagent's and a grocer's were clustered near, and the rest of the street was given over to houses which had the cheerless air that pertains to cheap apartments. Cards appeared ominously in windows.

Ruth glanced up once more to the street corner; the name stared down unmistakably. She endeavoured to remember that Sloane Street was only three streets off, and once the complicated way to Thimble Street discovered, the actual time involved in the journey was not great. Yet as Ruth walked on, looking for the number on Dollie's business

## THE WEST END SALESROOM

card, it was difficult to reconcile her associations of prosperity and plate-glass windows, or at least cleanliness and fresh paint, with the dingy exterior of the houses she was passing.

From outside, the house where Dollie lived was exactly like the others in the row, except that some rag, or article of clothing, dangled from an upper window, apparently put out to dry. Presently Ruth discovered the front door had opened automatically, and she was expected to walk in. There were names on a board inside the hall, with Dollie's at the top. Ruth struggled once more to subdue the feeling of depression as she made her way up the narrow oil-clothed stair, flanked by a shaky banister and imitation marble wall-paper, which time had stained to a rich chocolate hue.

A business card was pinned on the door on the top landing, and Ruth knocked gently.

"So you've found your way! It's close to Sloane Street, isn't it?" said Dollie, appearing almost instantaneously. "Come in! I'm longing for you to see everything. What do you think of it?"

"I must have time to look," said Ruth, startled on the threshold of the sitting-room by the sight of a book-case with glass doors,

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

whose shelves were filled with afternoon tea-cloths, neatly bunched. A queer appearance was also borne by the mantelpiece, whose ornaments and lustres served as props for cushion-covers. The red-clothed table, horse-hair sofa, and chiffonier were entirely covered with needlework arranged under billowy waves of art muslin, as if a deluge from a sale of work had descended through the ceiling.

"I have to keep everything covered because of the smuts," said Dollie. "It's bad enough when people turn things over. Don't the book-case and the sideboard come in useful? The mantelpiece makes an effective shelf, too, doesn't it?"

"You have worked hard," said Ruth, whose powers of appreciation had suddenly failed her.

"This is the bedroom; it's *so* convenient having folding-doors," said Dollie, pushing them aside and disclosing a room almost filled up with the bed. A window gave on a blank wall and a gas-jet glimmered in the corner. "I sit in here and work," explained Dollie. "I've turned the chest of drawers into a desk. My clothes do quite well in my trunk. It makes a splendid office, doesn't it?"

"Isn't it a little dark?" faltered Ruth.

## THE WEST END SALESROOM

"Perhaps it is a little," said Dollie. "But then, you see, I have the gas, and you have to put up with something for the sake of the convenience."

"Where's the bath-room where you have your meals?" asked Ruth, trying to feel pleasantly at home.

"Oh, I have them in here," said Dollie, glancing towards the washstand, on which stood a spirit lamp and one or two utensils huddled against the washing-basin. "The bathroom's on the floor below: I haven't it to myself. I tried cooking there at first, but you see there are other people in the house and they objected because I stayed there so long. It was rather awkward in the mornings. Besides, you can't enjoy your meals with people banging on the door: so I really wasn't sorry when the landlady came up about it. It's much nicer having meals quietly up here!"

"Oh!" said Ruth. "Yes!"

The most fantastic pictures were hurling themselves before her eyes. She held her hand within her muff, squeezing up the lining till it almost tore. She was suffering inward convulsions of unthinkable violence, which must be suppressed at all cost. Dollie,

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

calm, complacent, surveying the washstand with approving eyes, saw no humour in herself or her surroundings.

"Oh, how cruel I am, how cruel," thought Ruth, and yet could not control the impulse of hysteria. She turned to the bookcase and stood looking at its contents. How messy they appeared against the faded gimp which bound the shelves!

"It's very different, isn't it, from Amesbury?" said Dollie, returning to the sitting-room. "I don't know how it is, but a room in London gives one such an important feeling: it opens out such vistas. One's in touch with the whole world, here."

"How do people come?" asked Ruth, gaining control of herself. Dollie's assurance was stupendous. She was standing in the middle of her room like Napoleon.

"Oh, all sorts of ways," answered Dollie, with rather vague grandiloquence. "I have to send letters and circulars to the principal people here, Duchesses and the other leaders of Society."

"How do you know where they live?" asked Ruth.

"Telephone Directory," said Dollie. "I go into a Call Office and jot down likely



## THE WEST END SALESROOM

names. I've only got to the Ms, and I've sent over two hundred, most of them with a personal note."

"Do many come?" asked Ruth, trying to visualise Duchesses in Thimble Street and failing lamentably.

"Well, of course they don't come at once," said Dollie. "They're rather busier than Amesbury people: but they all know about it now and they'll come when it is time to buy their Christmas presents."

"It's November," murmured Ruth.

"People in Society always leave everything to the very last minute. Besides, as I told you, I've only got to the Ms," said Dollie rather impatiently. "I ought to have a secretary: I can't get more than thirty off each day. But the really substantial profits will come from the wholesale orders. If only I could get an introduction to a place like Liberty's! However, I shall go on calling till they let me through to the head buyer. Those clerk people daren't take the responsibility of buying superior things like ours. I can see I shan't do anything till I can get in touch with the heads of the firms."

"Oh, you have been to see people?" said Ruth.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Yes; but, as I said, it's no good without proper introductions—or time," added Dollie. "Everything needs time in London."

Dollie arranged the articles upon the mantel-piece with care—even affection.

"Has anybody been?" said Ruth, to whom the immense amount of work displayed was becoming unpleasantly suggestive.

"Of course people have been," cried Dollie. "Why, only last week a man came in and bought three pounds' worth."

"How did he hear of it?" said Ruth.

"Oh, he was one of the people I wrote to," answered Dollie.

"A Duke?" asked Ruth, quite innocently.

"Don't be silly," said Dollie. "I don't write to Dukes: they don't go in for anything but horse-racing: it's the Duchesses who take up charities."

"But this isn't a Charity," said Ruth.

"It's a sort of one," defended Dollie. "We give work to the villagers. And one can't explain the exact details to every stranger: after all, the financial part is our business, not theirs."

"What do you say when you write?" asked Ruth, whose gravity was fully restored now.

## THE WEST END SALESROOM

"Oh, I don't know: I attack people in different ways," said Dollie, refusing to meet Ruth's eyes.

"I'd like to see the circular," said Ruth, trying to fight back the doubt that would not go.

"I had to put it in a way they'd understand," said Dollie, unaccountably crimson. "They're used to Village Industries, so I had to call ours that."

The circular was indeed considerably framed for people of conventional understanding: the Industry was apparently one more worthy society organised for the relief of the distressed poor. While the destitution of the Amesbury villagers was not enforced with details, the suggestion was plain enough for the most dense-minded old lady. Dollie's name figured as "Honorary Secretary."

"Dolly!" said Ruth.

"Well, I don't get paid for the secretary work. I do all the writing in my overtime. I work till eleven o'clock: I'm drawing my bare expenses as attendant," answered Dollie. "People wouldn't come if they thought it was a purely business concern; and it isn't: you did start it with the idea of helping the village girls."

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Did you tell the gentleman who came that this was a charity?" asked Ruth.

"Oh no, he bought the things for their artistic value; he was interested because of Michael," cried Dollie. "As a matter of fact he was the man who lent Michael his studio. I wrote to him when I heard; I thought he'd be interested because of Michael's connection with it through you and Martha."

"What has Martha to do with it?" said Ruth.

"She's your sister," said Dollie. "Don't look like that, Ruth; I don't like doing these things any more than you would, but if one is to make a thing pay one must be business-like: and I'm determined that this shall succeed. I've staked all my self-respect upon it. I don't care what I've got to go through: I'm not going to lose a single chance. The London part is my idea and my venture and you must let me work it my own way. You can't walk calmly in for an hour and stop me doing what I know is necessary. It isn't fair. I have to sit here and slave and think all day with the entire responsibility."

The mirthful side of Dollie had disappeared; indeed, Ruth sat still, not knowing what to say or do. A new Dollie was evolving, ner-

## THE WEST END SALESROOM

vous, high-strung, whimpering. Her back had turned on Ruth, as if she did not want to listen to her: as if she were fearful, almost ashamed.

The worst of it was Ruth could not exactly put her finger on anything to which one could reasonably object: everything upon the circular was worded so that while people used to philanthropic industries would see this as one, the meaning *could* be construed truthfully. In the same way, it was true they had no official secretary. Dollie did write the letters in her overtime. And it was difficult to put all the myriad positions Dollie filled upon a circular.

"You see there must be some name to whom people can write," continued Dollie, more self-possessed. "I did think of putting 'Manager,' but that sounds like the head, and you're really that: and then also I didn't think uncle would like your name and address sent out broadcast."

"No: I'm sure he wouldn't," said Ruth. "I can see it's difficult."

"Specially when you know nothing about the conditions up here," said Dollie, her old self again. "We can't both do everything, so we must leave each other free. You do

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

see it isn't fair to come up for a few days and object to what I'm doing."

"Yes," said Ruth. "The only thing is to keep absolutely to the truth, isn't it? If it doesn't seem convenient or wise to us to let the truth be known, I think it's always well to examine the reason *why* it isn't convenient to us. You see, Dollie, if we are going into business we mustn't have any false pride about it."

"My dear, I haven't a ha-porth," cried Dollie. "I'd hawk the things from door to door! I assure you, I've no motives like that. No. Mine are purely diplomatic."

"The best diplomacy is to speak the exact truth," said Ruth. "Then your position's unassailable."

"Quite true, and I always do speak it. You know how open I am. Far too much inclined to speak out my mind," said Dollie, kissing Ruth in an affectionate, butterfly manner. "Now you will trust to my judgment as far as London is concerned, won't you? Oh, by the by, I've never shown you the flag. You saw it as you came up, of course, but you must see it close to."

Dollie had nipped over to the window, and was drawing in the piece of stuff which Ruth

## THE WEST END SALESROOM

had taken for a garment. "The Amesbury Village Industry. Cheap Christmas Presents," was displayed in worsted work of startling hue.

"I worked it myself," said Dollie. "Rather effective, isn't it, especially when there's a wind. It needs the wind to blow it out. I notice every one looks up at it."

"Do they come in?" asked Ruth, wondering if her vision was defective.

"Well, not all of them," said Dollie, patting Ruth's hand indulgently. "You little goose, you imagine everybody here has time to spare! But it must be getting the place known."

Dollie clipped the flag beneath the window-sash while Ruth digested the epithet of "little goose." Dollie, quondam worshipper and satellite, was indeed developing.

But she received the intimation of Dollie's departure without agitation: she was no longer afraid of the hordes of afternoon customers.

"I have to be back at five," said Ruth. "I told Martha I'd be in to get tea: she and Michael have gone to a concert."

"Oh, I shall be home by then," said Dollie, "unless I happen to get through to any one, and then of course I shall stay and talk, regardless of all ties. You must go if that's

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

the case, and leave the key with the woman in the basement. Still, I expect I shall be back."

Again Ruth's compassion rose up: Dollie, fixing on her veil, had such a curiously hunted look.

"Need you go?" said Ruth. "Dollie, dear, do you think it's worth all this trouble? Don't you think if we went on working quietly the business would develop without all this running about and trying to get the work in where people do not want it?"

Ruth's voice was so pleading Dollie could not flame. But she was inexorable.

"You simply know nothing of business," said she. "I've come up here to conquer London and I'm going to, if I work myself to skin and bone and walk the soles off all my boots. One can't get anything big unless one pays the price."

"But what's the use of a big success?" asked Ruth. "We had all the success we could manage comfortably."

"Comfortably!" flashed Dollie. "D'you think I value comfort? I want power."

"And what good will that do us if we get it?" said Ruth, almost desperately, for Dollie's mouth was set like a vice.



## THE WEST END SALESROOM

"*I* shall do good with it," said Dollie, elevating her chin and slightly turned-up nose as if she wished to disassociate herself from the inferior aims Ruth presumably was harbouring.

"We can't use more than our share," said Ruth, with earnest eyes. "There's only one Power, and we all have that behind us, governing us, if we live as near how we're told to as we can."

"Of course I was talking of worldly power," said Dollie rather shortly. "Human Power, I call it: the Power that moves life."

"There's only one Power," repeated Ruth. "And the more we strive and strain to get some other power the farther we get away from the only real power; and we grow ill and nervous, and if we get what we're trying for, the success brings us no pleasure, for there is no health in it. There isn't, Doll, you'll find there isn't!"

"Oh, of course if you switch in religion, one never can argue," said Dollie, snapping down the roll-top of her desk into its place. "I'm talking of life as it is."

"But so am I," said Ruth. "Life comes from God alone and He governs all we do. You can't get away from His power, Dollie."

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"I want to show more of it, then," said Dollie. "I don't mind what way you put it. You can't get away from the fact that ambitious people are the ones who climb to the top in this world."

"They don't always stay at the top even in this world," murmured Ruth.

"Oh dear, you are annoying," said Dollie, dropping a kiss on the top of Ruth's hair. "It's all Martha's influence, and Michael's. They're both dreadfully certain about such things. I believe in push. Still, we can't all think alike. I'm getting much more tolerant since I came up here."

"I suppose we've all got to find out things for ourselves," said Ruth, rather harassed-looking, all the same.

"Yes: it's no use preaching," said Dollie patronisingly. "Specially to deaf ears. Leave me alone, Ruthie, and I'll prove what will-power can do. Now be sure to be very pleasant if any one comes in—nothing pays so well. Whatever happens, don't seem shy. They always try to get the price down then! And sweep about, as much as possible. We have to carry off the room!"

Freed from Dollie's presence, Ruth had begun to take stock of the unsold things,

## THE WEST END SALESROOM

surely a big proportion of the work that had been sent. She had scarcely lifted the muslin off the table, however, when the door reopened and Dollie thrust in her head.

"Of course if anybody did come in, you can reduce," she panted. "Don't let any sale go by because of the price. What we want now is to become known."

The door banged once more; and once more the foolish convulsions seized on Ruth. This time she laughed. Yet in spite of her mirth an uneasy feeling lingered. The discovery of a cupboard filled with work made the stock almost intact: yet Dollie's letter had chronicled nothing but success. True, she had sent for money, but she spoke as if the loan was to be of the most temporary nature, merely till she could get her bank account in order, she wrote, as if she were filling the exchequer with her profits.

She had spoken in generalities; but if nothing had been sold, how could she call her experiment successful?

Ruth was very grave when an imperative tap sounded, and before she could move, the door opened to admit of the entrance of an elderly lady, followed by no less a personage than Mr. Fowles.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

The surprise was mutual. For the first moment both Ruth and Fowles stood speechless; the inquiring glance of Mrs. Fowles called for explanation, however, and her son performed the ceremony of introduction. Then, in her turn, Ruth accounted for her presence.

"My cousin is out," she said in her pretty, gentle voice. "I am in charge till she returns."

"My son tells me you and your sister have organised this Industry," said Mrs. Fowles. "Is—er—this the work?"

She held up her trailing robe and glanced round through her lorgnette in a detached manner as if she were not much impressed.

Ruth lifted the muslin from the table with the sensation of plunging into ice-water. The Amesbury workroom, clean, white-painted, orderly, with its busy workers, pleasantly arranged tables and sense of space and freshness was a place where one could welcome callers with assurance. But this setting did not inspire with equal confidence.

"My sister doesn't take part in it," Ruth faltered. "The business belongs to me and Dollie."

"You conduct it for the benefit of the

## THE WEST END SALESROOM

village girls, I understand," said Mrs. Fowles, bending a languid head over the embroideries now disclosed. "This is rather nice; look, Cyril! Quite a sense of colour: and exquisitely worked. Oh, really, these are very pleasing. Not at all like the usual charitable work."

"Miss Spence does the designs," said Fowles.

"Charming!" said his mother, with an understanding in her appreciation that made Ruth's cheeks glow. But a new awkwardness had sprung up.

"The Industry is not a charity," said Ruth. "It is a co-operative undertaking. My cousin and I share in the profits."

"Oh! I didn't understand that," said Mrs. Fowles, drawing herself up and surveying Ruth.

"The mistake was mine," said Fowles quickly. "I must have misunderstood your cousin."

"But you've taught the village girls?" continued Mrs. Fowles, whose expression was not unkind.

"Yes," said Ruth. "It began like that: then when Dollie came in to help we began to get so many orders we felt it was best to make it a proper co-operative business."

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Highly enterprising," drawled Mrs. Fowles. "I could see the quality was far above the philanthropic standard: but if I may say so, isn't it rather a mistake to show it in this way? Of course I understand what good work is, but the ordinary customer might be put off. It isn't fair to the work, is it, Cyril?"

"I tried to impress that when I came before," said Fowles. "But your cousin seemed so entirely satisfied——"

"Isn't it extraordinary!" cried Ruth; and suddenly she and Mrs. Fowles and Fowles were standing, looking at one another with perfect comprehension, as if they had all been switched on to a plane of intimate understanding.

"It is positively grotesque to exhibit a lovely piece like this in such a way," said Mrs. Fowles, holding up one of the show pieces, an elaborate bedspread, already soiled and crumpled.

"I know," said Ruth. "But Dollie says we must be in a good street, and rents are so expensive."

"But you're in a slum," said Mrs. Fowles, without any mincing of the matter. "If Cyril hadn't insisted on my coming, and I

## THE WEST END SALESROOM

hadn't admired Michael Keene's work and was ready to be interested in his wife's, nothing could have brought me here. What possessed you to start in such a place?"

"It's near Sloane Street," faltered Ruth, dazed by the confirmation of her most poignant doubts.

"But look at it!" said Mrs. Fowles. "You are obviously very inexperienced; but I should not have thought the most simple-minded creature could have imagined this locality alluring!"

Mrs. Fowles' thin mouth curved in an irresistible smile; her greyish hair was dressed in Botticellian bands, her dull pink gown was swathed now round her arm, as if she were making herself as slim as possible in deference to the crowded room. An end of her sable stole was caught up with the gown and twisted amongst the folds like a snake. She was terribly fashionable, and yet something in the curling smile, the mocking eyes, drew out Ruth's confidence. At least Mrs. Fowles said out exactly what she meant. One can never explain the subtle sympathy that draws the most alien temperaments together; Ruth, in her turn, appeared to Mrs. Fowles as an unsophisticated little country

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

girl, the sort of person who usually bored and irritated her to distraction; and yet Ruth pleased her: possibly because Ruth's eyes met hers with perfect honesty and without the least suspicion of embarrassment.

"I told your cousin all this," struck in Fowles, more at home now, and sauntering round the table. "But she is the most self-willed person I have ever met: one might as well try to convince a lamp-post its location was unsuitable. I can't even hope that my mother would have the slightest effect."

"No," said Ruth. "Nobody has. She always goes on with what she thinks right."

"It will be rather forlorn for her if she goes on long in Thimble Street," rippled Mrs. Fowles; and then they were all laughing helplessly.

"Oh, I don't know what to do," cried Ruth, abandoning all reserve. "I'm worried about the reserve fund. We had been putting aside part of the profits for a Village Club, and they're being drawn on now. A London show-room is dreadfully expensive."

"And quite unnecessary," said Mrs. Fowles. "If people want this sort of thing they'll send for it. If you begin to commercialise it, you can't produce the perfect things you can do in a small way."



## THE WEST END SALESROOM

"I expect Miss Spence agrees with you there; but the point is, how to convince her cousin?" said Fowles. "Look at this little panel. Isn't it delightful?"

"I'm afraid I can't undertake the conversion of young women who come up from the country and make blunders!" said Mrs. Fowles, with the merest suspicion of a yawn, scarcely, indeed, a movement; but Ruth knew instantly that Mrs. Fowles was not going to help. She saw, and understood, and laughed; and that was all. Ruth and Dollie must solve their own problems; already her interest was evaporating.

Even her appreciation of the work was not so keen. She cast her eye indifferently on the panel Fowles picked up, and finally chose a work-bag, as if she had to take something because Ruth was a personal acquaintance.

All the uncomfortable feeling had returned while Ruth packed it up and received the sovereign in exchange. Then Mrs. Fowles nodded as if her fitful interest in Ruth had faded, and trailed her draperies, her big hat, and her languid self out of the room as if she were relieved to be released from the experience.

She was glad to see that it was close on five; she set to work to cover up the table

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

as rapidly as possible. When another tap sounded she turned in some distress, for the operation of taking out and setting back the piles of embroideries was a lengthy one, and a repetition would make her return late if Dollie did not come.

It was Mr. Fowles.

"I only went down to put my mother in the car," said he, coming forward with the calm air of possession that had annoyed Ruth at their first meeting. Could that have been yesterday? She felt as if he were an old friend; certainly he was speaking and behaving like one.

"I am going," Ruth answered, glad of the chance to escape. Suddenly she felt that Fowles intended to make purchases. Even her love for Dollie could not render the prospect agreeable.

"Can I have the bedspread?" said Fowles, in not quite so assured a manner as usual. "I thought I'd come back and make sure, in case it might be gone."

The probability was not convincing enough to calm Ruth's fear—nay, certainty—that the purchase was of a friendly nature. Just why she could not say, but she felt she could not let him have it.

## THE WEST END SALESROOM

"Oh, I don't think I can get it out; I haven't time," she answered, pulling on her gloves.

"Here it is," said Fowles, lifting the muslin.

"Yes; but it's got to be packed up, and I want it, too," said Ruth. "I want it as a copy. I—I really can't let you have it; thank you very much for asking for it."

"But I want it," said Fowles. "May I have it later, after you've taken the pattern? It doesn't matter to me when it comes."

"Oh, I know it doesn't," cried Ruth, turning impetuously. "Will you do me a great favour? Will you please not buy anything? I know you feel you must. It's all wrong."

"My dear Miss Spence, if you are in business, you must let people buy the charming things you offer," said Fowles, at his ease now, and gazing down on Ruth with an imperturbable air. "What would Miss Dollie say?"

"Oh, something dreadful," said Ruth. "If you want it, you must get it from her. I can't explain; I know I'm ridiculous; but we've never bothered our friends, and I can't start now. Besides, I must go. I'm very sorry."

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"So one of the team is running away?" said Fowles, in an incomprehensible tone and with a hint of his mother's mockery. "You'll have to follow if you're in double harness or cut off! I shall come back to-morrow."

Ruth stood irresolute; then glanced up with the confidence that came irresistibly in Fowles' presence.

"I don't know why I feel the business part is wrong," she confessed. "I've always felt it right before; I love the workroom down at Amesbury. Oh, I wish you could see the work down there."

"I shall come down," said Fowles, continuing to gaze on Ruth as if the sight afforded him unusual pleasure.

"I could pack it up for you. It's five guineas," said she, yielding in a rush of remorse and heroism and weakness, quite unaccountable and impossible of analysis.

Fowles drew out his cheque-book and cleared a space on the mantelpiece; while Ruth wrapped up the bedspread with fingers that all her nervousness could not make clumsy. She was asking herself why she was giving in? And why had she refused at first? How ridiculous she had been! What an

## THE WEST END SALESROOM

insane position she had put herself into !  
And how disloyal she had been to Dollie !

Confusion dyed her cheeks as she offered the parcel and received the cheque. Fowles' expression was inscrutable ; and yet Ruth felt as if her expiation had been received with gratitude and sympathy ; she was glad and embarrassed together, and only wanted to get away out of the reach of the dominating influence.

Departure was not to bring this, however. Fowles accompanied her down the stairs, and though she bade him good-bye in the hall, he was still there when she ran up from the basement, where she had been to leave the key.

" I want to see Michael," said he ; " so if you don't mind, I'll come back with you."

There was nothing to say to this : Fowles had the right of admittance to Michael's home as much as Ruth : and she turned into the street with the gladness not entirely absent.

Somehow, she felt he might help Dollie to see things in a wiser light : the authority of his experience would have more weight than Ruth's unsophisticated persuasions.

## CHAPTER V

### A TÊTE À TÊTE

**A** NOVEMBER fog was creeping into the twilight, and the new-lit lamps shone mistily. Passers-by loomed suddenly out of the darkness, disappearing like people in a dream. After they had walked for a short time Ruth accepted Fowles' suggestion of a taxi-cab, and the remaining distance was soon accomplished. When they descended at the studio door, however, the fog was steadily increasing, even the lamps of the taxi were visibly shrouded, and it was impossible to see more than a step in front of one. Ruth was glad that somebody was with her, for the shut-off feeling was growing uncannily. The noise of the traffic sounded far away, as if a thick veil had come down between them and the outer world.

It was good to be in the studio, and Fowles set the kettle on the stove and was looking for the tea-service when Ruth came back after taking off her hat.

## A TÊTE-À-TÊTE

But when tea was ready Martha and Michael had not returned: and Ruth and Fowles found themselves tête-à-tête. They had a pleasant, friendly meal, and when tea was over Ruth sat looking into the fire and Fowles stood before the mantelpiece, feeling far more at home than when he had been living in his studio and had had it to himself. He was conscious of this, and after his eyes had travelled round the room, as if searching for the reason of the change in atmosphere, they returned to Ruth and rested on her with the contentment her presence now aroused.

"This place is different since you came," said he.

"We haven't moved a thing," said Ruth.

"Yes, you have," said Fowles, and then, as Ruth's eyes quested, said—"the loneliness."

"It must be lonely to live by oneself," said Ruth simply. "Why don't you always live with——" She paused.

"With my people?" said Fowles, and smiled grimly. "Have you never heard of the solitude of crowds?" said he. "That's what I lived amongst until I couldn't stand it a day longer. I've never had a home." He paused a moment. Ruth had taken up

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

her crotchet: her fingers moved with soothing regularity. "My mother has always been a globe-trotter," he continued. "I was brought up in hotels: Italy, Austria, Switzerland, the South of France. Sometimes we had a villa for a month or two, never longer: she always grew tired. My father was a faddist: used to live with his books and for his books and couldn't be moved from them. We used to visit him for a short time occasionally, but I hated his house: it was musty and untidy, and my mother was always ill when she went back. I started being ill myself. I found mother was pleased, because we got away sooner."

"Didn't you go to school?" asked Ruth.

"No: I had tutors," answered Fowles. "I believe I was partly an excuse for the travelling. My mother wanted me to be developed with a view to Art: she has always had a leaning that way; she's very cultivated."

"Yes, I saw that this afternoon," said Ruth, glad to have something nice to say. Fowles' tone was bitter.

"Did you?" said he, and then gave a short laugh and continued: "I should have thought you wouldn't have had room for



## A TÊTE-À-TÊTE

that impression. My mother's manner generally takes up all the attention of new acquaintances. Gracious, isn't it ? ”

Ruth bent her head: Fowles' tone hurt.

“Are you shocked ? ” said Fowles, still in the ugly, jesting voice. “My dear Miss Spence, I had all possibilities of illusion knocked out of me before I was six. My mother always loathed maternal relations as a grotesque and effete survival of barbaric days. She flattered herself she had no sentimentality about children. Usually a child was a drag on a woman of her intellectual qualifications, only she happened to be clever enough, as I said, to use me.”

“I wish you wouldn't ! ” said Ruth. Her work had stopped.

“Why not ? ” said Fowles. He looked down at the fire. Ruth's cry annoyed him.

“I don't see why a woman shouldn't go her own way if she wants to,” said he presently, raising himself with a shrug of his shoulders. “Especially if she's clever. I should say my mother's one of the finest connoisseurs in Europe. Now my father doesn't know a Corot from a Rubens. They're all High Art to him. She really couldn't have spent her life in Middlesbrough. My

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

father concentrated on fourteenth-century theology; of course now he's old, and his health's given way, she has to look after him. His doctors have been ordering him abroad, however, and he's up here now to be near his specialist. Extraordinary how things fit in to suit my mother."

"Oh! I can't listen, I really can't," said Ruth, rising with a suddenness that amazed her hearer.

"What have I said?" asked Fowles.

"I don't like the way you talk about your people," faltered Ruth. "It's inhuman."

"My dear Miss Spence, respect is a hopelessly antiquated quality," said Fowles, leaning his shoulders against the mantelshelf and looking down on Ruth with a terribly old expression. "My parents don't expect any honour or obedience, I assure you. When I parted company with my mother the relief was mutual: and now I'm with her again the strain is telling on the nerves of both of us, and we shall view the conclusion of the experiment with fully reciprocal feelings. I've been trained to criticise acutely, and she reaps the benefit of what she's sown."

Ruth moved about the room straightening cushions, picking up a newspaper, setting

## A TÊTE-À-TÊTE

books in their right place. She could not sit still and listen.

"Am I hopeless," said Fowles, still in the sardonic voice, "in outer darkness, the undutiful son? Do stop fidgeting and pour the vial of your wrath upon my prostrate head."

Ruth stopped in her perambulations but stood motionless. She did not know what to do or say. Fowles was showing a side of his nature that was wholly repugnant, and yet beneath the bitterness, she felt undreamed-of depths of loneliness. She wanted to comfort, and yet dreaded the lash of cynicism, for she had only simple words with which to help.

"You see, I have never known any conditions like those you speak of," said Ruth in her pleading voice, and Fowles raised his eyebrows and gave a surprised laugh.

"You're apologising!" said he.

"I wish I could help," said Ruth, forgetting the lash that waited.

"Oh, my dear girl," said Fowles, and turned from her and laid his head upon his arm. He wanted to laugh and yet the oddest, chokiest feeling had come up.

"Tell me about your people," said he

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

from behind the shelter of his arm. "Go on! It will interest me: I love looking at new people and their lives and general atmospheres. Describe your life."

"I can't," said Ruth, relieved at the turn the conversation had taken. "There's nothing to describe. We live in the country."

"And have pigs and chickens," said Fowles, but not unkindly.

"No," smiled Ruth. "We have a pony, two dogs and a cat; that's all the live-stock besides father's roses: they're his pets."

"Oh, you have roses, have you?" said Fowles. "Over the porch?"

"No," said Ruth. "They're sternly guarded in the rose garden; besides, there isn't a porch. But there's clematis and a grape vine and a wistaria on the house."

"That sounds very nice," said Fowles.

"It's a dear old house," said Ruth. "Very, very old. All the front is Jacobean, and one chimney-stack and the end of the south wing is Tudor. Of course it's been restored a lot. The back is Georgian: my great-great-grandfather built on to it."

"Oh!" said Fowles, astonished out of his usual self-possession. He had thought of Ruth and Martha as coming from a cottage:

## A TÊTE-À-TÊTE

the brief impression of Martha he had gained in her London student days was of an unsophisticated country girl; the subsequent meeting with Ruth in her servant's guise and the unaffectedness with which both girls did the housework of the studio had confirmed the idea of their modest origin. Ruth's reference to a great-great-grandfather was eye-opening.

"And you've always lived there?" said Fowles.

"Yes: always," answered Ruth, "and all our relations live near—that is in a twenty-mile radius; but that isn't far in the country, specially now we have the car. We don't lead a solitary life, I assure you." She raised a smiling face.

"Does your cousin, Miss Harvey, come from your part?" asked Fowles.

"Yes; their grounds touch ours," said Ruth. "We all had lessons together. You would like their garden, part is wild, and then there is an Italian garden, and a water garden, and most wonderful flowers. Aunt Margaret loves gardening. Father concentrates on roses, but Aunt Margaret loves everything."

Fowles was experiencing a succession of revelations. Dollie, in her neat and eminently

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

appropriate costume, had seemed the usual sort of shop-girl, of a superior kind, of course, but still, one of the bread-winning herds who flock into the city daily. Her devotion to the business of the Industry now seemed inexplicable.

"Doesn't she have to run that place?" he blurted out, too curious to conceal his wish to know.

"How do you mean—'have to'?" asked Ruth.

"Well, she doesn't earn her living?" said Fowles.

"Oh, yes," said Ruth. "Dollie hasn't an allowance now that she's come up to London. Of course, I live at home; but I've given up my allowance, too."

"I can't understand you," said he frankly. "You're always working. Why do you, if you haven't got to? Why does your cousin? She told me she was on till ten or eleven every evening, and got up at six and cooked her own breakfast and turned out the room. Why does she, if she hasn't got to?"

"She likes it," said Ruth.

"But day after day," said Fowles. "With no leisure at all and in such conditions!"

Ruth crocheted with down-bent head; she was wondering how far she could disclose

## A TÊTE-À-TÊTE

her anxiety to Fowles. The quiet, fire-lit atmosphere was conducive to confidences; her anxiety was heavy, too, and she was longing to unburden it to some one of wider experience than hers. Yet Dollie's affairs were her own business; Ruth had repented her brief outbreak before Mrs. Fowles that afternoon. She realised, somehow, that if she yielded to the impulse to talk things over now with a chance companion loyalty might be infringed. Therefore she suppressed the longing to confide, and answered:

"Dollie believes in independence, even though its conditions are difficult at first."

"You aren't absolutely at one, though, are you, about this showroom?" said Fowles, scrutinising the sweet face from under the shadow of his hand.

"I have no business to come up and judge," said Ruth, colouring at the remembrance of her revelation of the afternoon.

"But you say the expenses are swallowing the fund you put by for a possible Village Club," Fowles continued, trying to force entrance to Ruth's confidence.

"It was very disloyal of me," murmured Ruth, in such obvious pain that even Fowles, for all his inquisitorial curiosity, felt sorry.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Oh, no," said he. "You must have advice upon a problem, sometimes."

"Not on other people's problems," answered Ruth. "Dollie and I are partners; we have no right to consult with any one about each other's part in the business. Please try to forget what I said. I can't think what I was doing. I haven't said a word to Martha or Michael; I wouldn't dream of doing so; and you won't, either, will you?"

"I won't say anything," said Fowles, with new tenderness in his voice. "But I can't promise to forget; so now that I know, if you can make use of me in any way, won't you do it? One never knows. I might be able to help a little."

"Oh, thanks," said Ruth, raising such grateful eyes that Fowles looked away.

"In what manner do you think I could?" he asked.

"Not by buying," said Ruth, very swiftly. "I'm not being considerate for you, really; but if there isn't sufficient demand for our work, it will be far better for Dollie's eyes to be opened than for you to help to keep them shut by giving orders. And it's very difficult not to help in that way when you're sorry or interested; but we must make the experi-



## A TÊTE-À-TÊTE

ment in a proper business way. Of course, if you really needed something, it would be different; but will you promise to be quite, quite honest with yourself about your motives, and never to buy a thing that you wouldn't have bought at an ordinary shop?"

"I never buy anything at an ordinary shop," said Fowles. "The very sight of a plate-glass window sends cold shivers down my back. I abhor the idea of personal belongings that are sold in dozens. So I can't promise that; but I will promise to help in a better way, if I can think of one. Can't you suggest one?"

"If you could come in and see her now and then, when we're gone," said Ruth; "I think she's really a little lonely. She doesn't know any one up here; and you're interested in the work and understand about such things, and possibly your knowledge of—of——"

"The state of the market," put in Fowles.

"Yes, the market," smiled Ruth, "would have weight. You'd see how things were going."

"And could let you know," said Fowles, gazing now at the fire.

Ruth bent her head, trying to remain unconscious.

"If anything turned up that I thought you

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

ought to know," continued Fowles with strict impersonality. "I don't expect anything will, but still, it's always well to feel you're in touch with some one here whom you can write to, and who will write to you, if anything does turn up."

"Yes," said Ruth, doubting her thrill of happiness. She had told Fowles a good deal, after all, in spite of her resolution; but then, he already knew.

"Don't let Dollie know I've ever said a word," said Ruth. "She hates to be talked over. Oh, I wish I hadn't."

"But you haven't," said Fowles, with a kindness that soothed Ruth. "I only, very impudently, offered to help; and you, very discreetly, told me what I mustn't do, and on being pressed, gave me a vague suggestion that I am left free to work out as I think fit. The most sensitive conscience can have nothing to reproach itself with in what you have done."

"But I let out about the Village Club, before your mother, too," said Ruth.

"My dear Miss Spence, do you flatter yourself she so much as remembers your existence?" said Fowles, in a tone that made Ruth's heart ache. "Good gracious! Do you imagine

## A TÊTE-À-TÊTE

she has ever given a thought to any one's concerns except her own? She could make your Industry a success by half a dozen words at one of her receptions; but do you think she'd trouble to say one? Not if she heard you were starving. If I began to speak of it, she'd at once describe the room and Thimble Street. There isn't a spark of human feeling in her; not a spark."

"There is!" said Ruth, in a sudden rush of love that defied all the testimony of her eyes and ears, and reached out to the woman with the mocking eyes and mirthless smile, whose only son spoke of her so cruelly. "It's there in every one, if only we would look for it; if only we could see."

"Judas hadn't a lot of it," sneered Fowles.

"Judas' heart broke; he repented; he took back the silver; he'd have done anything, anything," cried Ruth. "Oh, there's forgiveness for him, surely, surely, if God is Love. There's *no* limit to God's love and God's forgiveness."

"I should like to see my mother if she heard God's forgiveness mentioned in connection with her exalted self, or His love, for that matter," said Fowles. "I wonder what she would say?"

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Don't," said Ruth. "She's unhappy." Her eyes had filled with tears; she struggled to keep them back in vain.

"Well, I should think you're the first person in the world who's ever felt pity for my mother," said Fowles, staring at Ruth with an astonishment that was at once appreciative and terribly detached. "Nearly every soul she knows is afraid of her. My father's like a beaten dog. He knows just how she feels to him. Even I'm not comfortable with her. She's so abominably intellectual; she reduces everything to words—and dust. No, I've never known any one pity her before."

"I'm sure she's unhappy," repeated Ruth, and looked up at Fowles as though pleading with him to be merciful.

"I suppose all selfish people are," said Fowles, and straightened himself against the mantelpiece and looked ahead of him across the luxurious room. "I know I am."

Ruth could not look up; the loneliness in his voice was moving her as nothing had done in her sheltered, happy life. She felt she had suddenly come to the edge of the wilderness where there was no spring of water, only the Dead Sea. But the vastness

## A TETE-A-TÊTE

of the desert kept her silent. How could her voice reach them? How could her weak hand aid?

"I can of mine own self do nothing."

The words stole into her consciousness as if to renew her strength. She shut her eyes, and knew the Truth: that God was Love and ever present, guarding, helping, guiding *all* His children.

"D'you know my mother's never let me do anything?" said Fowles. "I wanted to be an architect; my father wasn't so ill then, and he insisted on articling me; but my mother whipped me off. She didn't care to travel by herself. India was the temptation that she offered, and like a fool, I fell. When she'd got me, she kept me. Then, when it was too late to take up architecture, I wanted to design furniture. But she saw that I didn't stick to it. If I had a profession of my own, I shouldn't be so accessible. So here I am, at thirty-two, having never earned a penny and too old now to start at anything if I had the energy to want to try, which I haven't. It's been sapped, successfully."

"I can of Mine Own Self do nothing." How those words stayed! stayed in the best sense too, a very anchor on the Rock. However

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

hopeless any problem seemed, all could be solved by the Power that could free any one from every human difficulty, and show the real man, free and strong and shining.

"Why don't you ask for strength?" said Ruth, forgetting fear in the sureness of her faith.

"Perhaps I am asking," said Fowles, looking down on her. "I believe I am asking you."

"I can't give it you," said Ruth, meeting his gaze now with eyes that had no trace of self within their consciousness. "Why don't you ask God? We are promised that what we ask for will be given—if we believe."

"But I don't believe," said Fowles, in short, nipped accents, as if he were trying to force his words like pellets on to her. "I don't believe in God or man; I don't believe in anything. What hope is there for any one like that?"

"All the hope there is," said Ruth; and a smile of such radiance lit up her face that the cynicism on Fowles' lips died into silence. What made her smile like that?

"There's nothing God can't do," said Ruth. "He can give anything. He can give faith. Ask Him to give you faith—and see."

"I don't know that I want faith," said

## A TÊTE-À-TÊTE

Fowles, wondering if he was being hypnotised. Why did he let her talk like this? Usually he squirmed at any mention of religion. But Ruth was so sweet and sincere a missionary, he could not dislike her, even though her words were meaningless.

"You want happiness," said Ruth, with such abundance in her face and eyes and smile that the man who looked down on her felt the infection and smiled unconsciously.

"I suppose I do," said he. "My sort of happiness, though. That wouldn't be in the least like yours."

"There's only one happiness," said Ruth.

"Oh no, my dear girl," said Fowles. "There are a million sorts of happiness, thank God!"

"Thank God!" said Ruth. "A million sorts, but all from Him, the Giver of all good."

"Some people's happiness isn't found in good," said Fowles.

"Is it happiness?" said Ruth. "Does it lead to happiness? Do they stay happy?"

Her eyes met Fowles with a deep, irresistible call for honesty. He drew up with a little shiver.

"No; one doesn't stay happy," said he. "It would be very boring if one did. Do you know it's nearly seven?"

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"No," said Ruth. "I'd forgotten there was such a thing as time. Where can they be?"

Martha and Keene's absence had recurred for the first time since tea.

"They've lost their way in the fog; I saw it was going to be a bad one," said Fowles. "I wonder what we'd better do?"

"Get supper," answered Ruth, who had folded up her work and was already half across the room.

"Why? What good can that do?" said Fowles, dumbfounded.

"Lots!" said Ruth from the kitchen door. "It will be late for Martha to start when she comes in."

"But something may have happened to them," said Fowles, joining Ruth at the neat stove.

"I don't think so," said Ruth, rinsing potatoes busily. "Not to Michael and Martha." The smile in her eyes was very sure.

"Why? Charmed lives?" said Fowles, who had become quick now to read every inflection of Ruth's tones.

"All are safe who know they are," Ruth answered, still with the sure smile.



## A TÊTE-À-TÊTE

"I feel I ought to be helping," said Fowles.

"So do I if you're going to stay," said Ruth.

"Am I going to stay?" said Fowles, and looked at his watch again. "I might as well," said he; "it will be very disagreeable turning out from here; the fog's a capital excuse, too."

"For what?" asked Ruth.

"Shockingly unfilial neglect of duty," answered Fowles. "A dinner I solemnly promised to attend. My father's too ill to come down, and my beloved mother is depending on me to play host."

"The fog may have lifted," said Ruth.

"We won't investigate," said Fowles. "And fogs are obligingly local. What am I to do?"

"Go home," murmured Ruth. "Please, please!"

"Ah, you should have met me earlier," said Fowles. "It's too late now. You must accept me as I am—with all my weaknesses and sins."

"I can't," said Ruth, and looked up bravely. "Please go back," said she.

"What does it matter to you or any one else in the whole world?" said Fowles, returning her look with a hardness that made Ruth's heart yearn to him.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"It matters a lot to me," said Ruth.

"Does it?" said Fowles. The cold eyes searched Ruth's for a sign of insincerity, but they bore the ordeal unflinchingly. "Why, I believe you're speaking the truth," said he.

Ruth did not wince; her gaze was unfaltering in its appeal.

"I believe I'd like to stay," said Fowles, dropping his voice to a queer low accent. "I want to stay badly. Mayn't I?"

Still Ruth did not answer; the brave eyes only looked—and asked.

"All right, then," said Fowles, drawing himself up with the hardness back, apparently unchanged. "You want me to do my duty, don't you, because you feel the responsibility of every lame dog that you meet. Well, I might as well please you after the rotten hour I've given you."

"You haven't," said Ruth, in a rush of love and pity; and then stopped short, for the hard eyes were looking at her again so searchingly and so incredulously.

"I like talking to you," said Ruth.

"Why?" said Fowles. "How can you? I see you wincing. You loathe my point of view of everything; you see me as a

## A TETE-À-TÊTE

backboneless bit of waste ; you've said as much. D'you think I don't know ? The one thing I've learnt is to read people."

"Oh, you do hurt," breathed Ruth.

"Then why do you like me ?" cried Fowles savagely.

"Every one needs liking," said Ruth.

"Pity ?" said Fowles ; "I think that's worse than anything."

"I can't help it," said Ruth. She faced him, wide-eyed. The situation was too terrible for tears. The man before her seemed incapable of receiving the simplest human friendship : and yet—oh, how he needed it !

"Bless you," said Fowles ; and turned shortly and went out of the little kitchen, leaving Ruth still standing, breathless in her turn. It was as if he had taken—something : she did not know what ; but something—he had taken something.

Supper needed her attention, and she laid the table and prepared the food ; and soon after heard the sound of a latchkey and realised gratefully that Keene and Martha had arrived.

They had met a friend of Keene's at the Hall, who had insisted on taking them to

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

tea, and were full of apologies. Ruth heard as in a dream. She was scarcely able yet to take in ordinary things of life. In these two days she had been lifted on to another plane; up till now, her simple faith had not been attacked, or even called on, strenuously.

Now she had been brought up suddenly and sharply, close against a life whose problems were apparently insurmountable, the shock had roused all her trust in the Supreme Power that sometimes seemed so far away. With her father and her aunt and Jock and Bob and Dollie, Ruth felt in some degree responsible and inadequate. With Fowles and his mother, she could not proffer any human aid; their problems and conditions were utterly beyond her. She only saw their hopelessness and apparent helplessness, and knew that with God nothing was impossible. And just because she felt so powerless, she turned to God and asked for help like a child. In doing so she felt her trust grow strong, and the fear for Dollie had somehow faded, even vanished, for the moment. Fowles' offer of help had come as a little sign that Dollie was not to be left alone; and in the great flash of light, when Ruth had affirmed the Power of Divine Love to help *all*, had

## A TÊTE-À-TÊTE

come the knowledge that Infinite Love was indeed inexhaustible, and could give help in every problem where its help was sought.

Martha and Michael felt a change, although they could not describe it, even to each other.

Martha expressed her feeling to Michael that night by saying Ruth was growing more self-reliant now she was released from Dollie's influence.

But Michael, remembering the sureness of the eyes that had said Good-night to him, nodded somewhat thoughtfully.

"She's different, certainly. But she looks to me as if she's facing something that only God can help; and is holding on for all she knows."

"Ruth has no problems," said Martha drowsily. "The most serious thing in her life is the Industry, and she knows that father would never really make her give it up."

"She's not worried," maintained Michael. "But she's holding on. You can never mistake the look. And we none of us know what's in the quietest-seeming lives. For all we know, Ruth may be going over red-hot plough-shares."

"Michael!" said Martha, awake indeed.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"You dear child!" said Michael, calming her with his strong hold. "I know no more than you; and Ruth won't tell us. Besides, it doesn't matter; she's holding on to the only help that's any use."

"Mr. Fowles was at the Industry," said Martha. "He came back with Ruth."

"And didn't stay to supper," said Michael. "If Fowles had felt the faintest inclination to stay on, nothing on this earth would have stopped him gratifying it. No, dearest, I don't think we need be afraid of Fowles!"

"Ruth admires his taste," said Martha, with instinctive prescience. "He's just the sort of wasted, lonely person who'd attract her."

"It seems desecration to think of a man 'attracting' Ruth," said Michael shortly.

"Oh, my dear, she's only a girl!" cried Martha. "Oh, I shall never forgive myself if Ruth——"

"I'm going to turn out the light," said Michael. "Good-night."

## CHAPTER VI

### JOCK SPRING-CLEANS

"I MUST go back at once," said Ruth.

"Mother says she *can* manage for a day or two," said Martha, but without much conviction. She knew Ruth would find little pleasure away from home now that her father needed her. News of a broken arm had come that morning; there was no danger, but Mr. Spence would be laid up some time, and as he refused to have a stranger in the house to nurse him, Ruth's presence was essential. "You've only been here two days," Martha continued. "Couldn't you stay to-night, at least? You accepted Mr. Fowles' invitation, and he will have booked your seat at the theatre."

"I couldn't stay," said Ruth. "You know what father is when he has set his heart on anything. He wants me to look after him."

"If you feel like that, I suppose you'd better go," said Martha. "But I am dis-

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

appointed. You'll have to pay us a visit at our home if father doesn't get better in time for you to come back here. It's too bad that you should be whipped off like this. I can't see why you should have had the bother of coming up for nothing."

"How do you know it has been for nothing?" asked Ruth. "If it is only for the peep I had at Dollie, I think the visit has been worth while. By the by, I do want you to keep in touch with her. She seems as if she needs some one whom she can talk to."

"I'll see as much of her as I can," said Martha. "But Dollie and I have never hit it off, exactly; I suppose we're too much alike. And now I'm married, she's more suspicious of my wanting to patronise her than ever. However, I'll certainly invite her; and I must go into the showroom, too, one day. By the by, you didn't tell us what it's like."

"Didn't I?" said Ruth. "I was so interested in all your news. Have you got a time-table? If there's a morning train that I can catch, I'd like to go by that. It would be nice if I could be home for tea."

"Oh, it seems dreadful to think you're



## JOCK SPRING-CLEANS

really going," cried Martha, forgetting everything but the imminence of Ruth's departure ; and then a train was discovered which left little time for anything but packing and getting to the station.

Martha returned to a lunch which seemed very solitary. Michael had gone out before the summons came, and would not be back till late in the afternoon. Martha was thinking of the days when Nita and Jock had lived a few streets away ; it would have been pleasant if they had been there now. But Nita was teaching in a school in Canada, and Jock married to Bob and settled down for good at Amesbury. Life was presenting a rather insecure and shifting appearance altogether, when the studio bell rang and Martha went to open it, fearing lest it was bad news from home.

Whether the news was bad or good, a messenger from home stood there.

"Jock !" said Martha in amazement. "Nothing has happened ?"

"What should have happened ?" said Jock, rather uncomfortable in her turn.

"I was afraid you'd been sent—about father," sighed Martha, in a great breath of relief.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Why?" asked Jock, staring at Martha in so blank a manner that was again returned as Martha said,

"Haven't you heard?"

"Not a word," said Jock. "I saw him in the car yesterday, going off to golf."

"He slipped on the links and broke his arm," Martha explained, as she led the way into the studio. "He was brought back in time for mother to catch the evening post; and Ruth went back this morning. He'll be in bed for some time; and even when he's up, will want looking after."

"Why can't they have a nurse?" asked Jock.

"Father wanted Ruth," said Martha. "And she wanted to go. She's devoted to father. But it is too bad."

Jock pursed up her lips with an enigmatical expression; she was learning to suppress her opinions on the ideals of domestic duty held by Bob's relations.

Martha, however, had been a fellow-student, and had shared Jock's iconoclastic theories in those days; and though Martha had settled down to a quiet home-life now, she had married an artist, and Jock did not feel wholly alien. The studio was more homelike than the drawing-rooms at Amesbury.

## JOCK SPRING-CLEANS

"Yes, I know," said Martha, answering Jock's expression with perfect comprehension. "But then, Ruth isn't like us. She loves doing things for people. Besides, I don't believe she's ever disappointed. As Michael puts it, she holds on, and feels that everything is really for the best, whatever it looks like. I wish I'd half her faith—or sweetness."

"I haven't much chance of seeing Ruth," said Jock. "We're both too busy. Besides, she's not my sort; she's never had any trials."

"I'm sure she has, only she never makes anything of them," Martha said. "No one can escape scot-free."

"Some go freer than others," Jock maintained. "Look at her face; there isn't a line on it. She's been sheltered all her life, with never an anxiety nor responsibility more than the choice of a new hat, or a talk with a girl in her Bible-class. One can't feel much in common with her, however one likes her; for, to be friends, people must have had something like the same experience. I could be friends with Dollie easier than with Ruth; she's nearer to my temperament, though we hate each other."

"Jock!" said Martha.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"It's no use evading facts," said Jock, with stubbornness apparent in her face. "All Bob's relations detest me. I detest them, so we're quits."

"But, Jock, that's dreadful," said Martha.

"Why?" said Jock, shrugging her shoulders. "We keep out of each other's way. I never trouble my head about them, and I hope some day they'll learn enough wisdom to stop troubling themselves about me."

"You don't include Aunt Margaret?" said Martha.

"She's the most sensible of the lot, but the hardest to keep out of sight of," said Jock grimly. "And what she expects and wants for Bob couldn't be done by an angel from heaven, which I'm not and never shall be, especially if I continue to have the orders in my own house given by a stranger."

"Aunt Margaret is wrapped up in Bob," murmured Martha, very serious at the knowledge that was being unfolded.

"She'll have to unwrap, if there's ever to be any peace for us," said Jock, with a flash in her eyes that spoke volumes.

"Oh, dear!" said Martha, holding her chin in her two hands and knitting her brows as if in quest of a solution.

## JOCK SPRING-CLEANS

"D'you mean they haven't told you what a blunder Bob's committed?" asked Jock, in her most sarcastic tones. "How he's done for himself, for all time, in marrying a degenerate Irish girl with advanced ideas? Ah, that's what you miss by being away from home. I don't believe there's anything else that's touched on in the privacy of Bob's relations' family circles. D'you mean to say Ruth hasn't said a word?"

"Not a word," said Martha, most emphatically. "Except that she hadn't seen as much of you as she should like; and when she went back, she was going to make time to come round and see you, however much there was to do at the Industry."

"Why does she want to see me?" said Jock, from underneath suspicious eyebrows.

"She feels she's being cut off from her friends by so much work," said Martha in perfect honesty. "And now that Dollie's in London, she's more alone than before."

"So I'm to be taken up as a stop-gap," smouldered Jock. "Thank you kindly."

"Now, Jock, you know Ruth always liked you from the very first," said Martha, treating Jock's contrariness with the tolerance of an old friend.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Every one liked me till I married Bob and they found out what I was like," Jock scowled with prodigious scorn. "It was only when they found I wasn't going to fit into the family according to their conventional ideas, that they turned on me. I can't help being myself, though I quite agree that being what I am Bob might have provided better for his comfort than by marrying me; and as long as his relations make his comfort their concern, he won't get much."

Jock closed her lips like a spring-trap, and surveyed Martha and her work-basket with smouldering eyes.

"Those Michael's socks?" said she.

"Yes," said Martha.

"His mother mends my husband's," said Jock. "She always has done; and he's very sensitive to anything uncomfortable; and I'm so taken up with my work, I might neglect them. It was put most considerately. As it happens, there's one thing I can do, and that is, darn. I didn't bring up five small brothers without learning that."

"Why don't you ask her to let you do them?" cried Martha.

"Ask her! I wouldn't ask her if I were dying," answered Jock. "I wouldn't let her

## JOCK SPRING-CLEANS

know I cared whether Bob went barefooted. I wouldn't let him know either. They've made up their minds I don't care what happens to my home or him; and they shan't have any evidence to the contrary."

"Is Bob enjoying the position?" asked Martha quietly.

"Oh no," said Jock. "But he's got his mother's house to go to, so he gets a meal such as he's always been accustomed to, occasionally; and he's got his mother to talk things over with, and that helps him to bear up. The advice which she comes round the next morning to hand out to me is most inspiring. Unfortunately, as I tell her, I'm a heathen, with no faith in anything but minding my own business."

"I should be extremely angry with you for being so silly, only I don't expect the position's anything as bad as you make out," said Martha.

"It's a thousand times worse," said Jock, with an agony in her voice that made Martha's heart give a sickening thump. She kept on darning, trying not to show that she had noticed. Jock could never bear sympathy.

"This is a real trouble," said Jock, speaking very quickly and softly. "The others were

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

nothing. I could stand being turned out of my father's home : I didn't want to stay with a stepmother ! I could stand fighting my way and working and starving : those were troubles I could have to myself. But I can't stand living in the middle of a ring of eyes and tongues, with everything I do spied on, and twisted ; I can't stand living with some one who's dissatisfied and regretting."

"Jock, that's not true," said Martha. "Bob never, never, never would give up loving any one he'd loved enough to marry. You don't know him."

"Oh, of course I don't," said Jock bitterly. "And you all know him so well ! I've only had the privilege of a two years' acquaintance, and ought to be only too anxious to improve my knowledge of my husband's character from the light his family and friends are kind enough to throw on it. Now, what a fool I am to have talked to you ! All this will be retailed when you pay a visit home."

"My dear Jock, I'm married myself," said Martha, and the simple words had an understanding that won Jock's difficult confidence.

"How have you got on ?" said she. "You live close to his mother and father."



## JOCK SPRING-CLEANS

"Oh, I've been left alone," said Martha, with a gratitude for blessings that had scarcely been understood till now. "I dreaded going there, because Mrs. Keene is a noted house-keeper; but she never came near. I had to find out my own tradespeople and everything. I thought it funny, till Michael explained his people had such a firm belief in independence, they always left him to work out his own problems, and were leaving me to work out mine. She was always glad to help when I asked, of course; but she never offered advice once. I might have been as experienced as herself."

"The impudence of it all is, I am experienced," flamed Jock. "I've housekept by myself for five years, and looked after my father's house when my mother died and I was ten; and did every blessed thing for five small boys. My ways aren't Bob's mother's ways, perhaps; but my house isn't hers."

"Does she know all this?" asked Martha.

"She knows, and she's just sorry for me," said Jock. "Sorry that any one could have been brought up in such poor, scrambling ways, without parlourmaids and late dinners and changing into low-necked dresses every

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

evening. Oh, she's sorry ! She didn't blame me ; she doesn't now, even though she's found the scramblingness has bit into my soul and I keep on my coat and skirt for dinner. But she tells my servant what sort of a dinner Bob is used to, and sends up pheasants from the poulterers, and sweets her cook has made, and fruit from her green-houses, so that Bob shan't be cut off from all the joys of civilisation and his youth. She found that I was giving him grilled herrings, and tripe and onion sauce."

"Jock, I can't believe it," said Martha, flinging down her work and rising to confront Jock more successfully from the divan. "I simply don't believe it. I know Aunt Margaret ! She may send up things from the gardens. Why shouldn't she, when she has so much—far more than she can use—and you are near ?"

"Oh yes, we're near," said Jock. "Not ten minutes' walk across the ha-ha and the meadow."

"Bob's her only son," continued Martha.

"Is that supposed to be information ?" asked Jock.

"They've always been the closest chums," said Martha, "But she's not unkind, and

## JOCK SPRING-CLEANS

she's not jealous; she has a big warm-hearted nature, and the way she welcomed you into the family, the way she took you to her heart——”

“I said they were all right to me before they knew me,” grunted Jock.

“Well, you must be to blame if things are wretched,” said Martha boldly. “There is no reason why you and Bob shouldn't be happy. You both love being out of doors; you have a charming home in the most lovely country; Bob's drawing a good salary; he is the best-tempered person I've ever met, except Michael; and besides all this, you are as much in love with each other as two people can be. Now, Jock, if it's jealousy that's making you act like this——”

Martha had plumped down on the rug in front of Jock; she was not in the least afraid of her, and Jock knew it.

“It isn't, Martha,” she said earnestly. “I swear no one would be patient under the way my house is ruled. She does see me as some one who can't make Bob comfortable, and so she has to. If I work all day and night, I'm driven to it: my pride makes me. My jewellery is wanted; I'm exhibiting at four places now, and selling all the time.”

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Oh, you're going on with your jewellery?" said Martha slowly.

"Yes; I told Bob I'd never be dependent on him," answered Jock. "It's a grievance to his people that I have no drawing-room. But Bob has a smoking-den; why shouldn't I do as I please with my room, too?"

"Have you turned it into a studio?" asked Martha.

"No; it's a workroom," answered Jock. "I've had a gas-fire and a blow-pipe and a little furnace fitted up. I don't make any pretence. From the beginning I always said I wouldn't have callers."

"But where do you sit in the evening? and on Sundays?" asked Martha.

"I'm working, sometimes," said Jock. "And there's Bob's den; it is rather small, but we can sit in it."

"Don't you ever have people?" said Martha.

"No," said Jock. "I hate company. Besides, I believe in a woman keeping her individuality! Why should marriage alter a woman any more than a man? Bob goes on with his work at his office."

"Yes; but not in his home," said Martha.

"Michael works at home," said Jock. "He has a studio."

## JOCK SPRING-CLEANS

"But I keep his house nice for him," said Martha. "We shouldn't be very comfortable if I had no time to look after our home, or see people. We like our neighbours."

"Well, I don't mine," said Jock. "We're not congenial. If Bob wants a home, why shouldn't he give up the time to make one?"

"He's earning the money," said Martha.

"So am I," said Jock. "I insist on paying half. As Bob's used to such style, I have to work harder. I tell him we'll rise to a parlourmaid if I have to work eighteen hours a day."

"It wouldn't take that long to keep a little house nice, if you did all the work," cried Martha.

"I mean, eighteen hours at jewellery," said Jock.

"Why don't you work less at that and be the parlourmaid yourself?" said Martha persuasively.

"Because my pride's up now," said Jock. "I meant to work in moderation, except when any special order came. Unfortunately, an order did come directly we got back, and then another, and I confess I did let the house go; but I was learning I oughtn't to, and I'd made up my mind I'd refuse to work at

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

night if another order came, and I'd take the time to see we had proper meals. But while I was thinking these things, Bob's mother came to the rescue, and she's stopped on, rescuing us, ever since."

"Bob can't be happy," said Martha.

"No, he's not, nor am I," said Jock. "And as he doesn't like the hammering in the evening, I've come up to look for a studio where I can work and sleep when anything important comes. I'll only want one room."

"Does Bob know?" gasped Martha.

"No, he doesn't," said Jock. "And he'll not know till my arrangements are concluded. I don't invite consultation with the family; they'll have enough to say when they hear my London studio is taken."

"And you'll leave Bob for days together?" asked Martha, unbelievably.

"We get nothing from each other's society when a rush of work comes in," Jock answered doggedly. "He goes over to his mother's; and some nights I work till twelve."

"How awful!" said Martha, sitting back upon the rug with a shudder.

"It's a bit lonely," said Jock, staring ahead.

"And all unnecessary," said Martha.

## JOCK SPRING-CLEANS

"What do you want to earn such a lot of money for?"

"I don't," said Jock. "Working as hard as I can, I don't earn half the expenses; that's what worries me. As I haven't time to do a thing, we have to have a girl besides the housekeeper, and a boy for the garden, and their food's enough to ruin us."

"I thought so," said Martha. "It isn't worth it! You'd be earning as much if you looked after your house, and managed the meals, and gardened; and Bob would have a home he could rest and be happy in, instead of a sort of factory."

"But I'd give up my independence," said Jock between her teeth.

"Now, what good is it doing you?" said Martha.

"I'll never give up my convictions," Jock answered. "I'll never sink to a domestic drudge."

"I'm not suggesting you should drudge," said Martha. "It's what you're doing now. Why not work in moderation, which you'd come to the conclusion was the best way? It's very weak to let Bob's people govern everything you do."

"They don't," gasped Jock.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"But they do," persisted Martha. "If you won't look after your house or Bob, because of what they think about you."

"They'd think they were influencing me, if I did," said Jock.

"What does it matter?" said Martha. "I wouldn't let any one prevent me from managing my own home properly and making Michael happy. What business is it of any one's but yours?"

"Then why did they push in?" asked Jock.

"Push them out by looking after things yourself," said Martha.

"There's too much to encounter," said Jock, sinking her chin into her hand despairingly. "It's no use, Martha. I was born under an 'onlucky star,' and I'll bring nothing but trouble to myself and all who have the bad luck to be tied to me. 'Tis no use trying to go against one's fate."

"Oh, every one's meant to be happy," cried Martha, jumping up as if she could not bother with Jock's affairs any longer. "Go home and put your house in order; things certainly won't get better until you change your point of view. I'm not going to lecture you any more. Could you do with some tea?"



## JOCK SPRING-CLEANS

"What time is it?" asked Jock, a little sulky. "So late as that? I think I'll try and catch the four o'clock. I'll be home before I thought, then."

Jock took her departure, apparently unshaken; but Martha's words had sunk in and were working. There was a possibility that she had given undue power to the opinions of those around her; perhaps she ought to have followed the conviction that experience had brought, even though it coincided with the views of her mother-in-law. Perhaps she had been slightly "contrary."

"'Tis a fault of mine," admitted Jock.

The picture of the studio, with its atmosphere of peace and order, and Martha, sewing at leisure, in her pretty house-gown, had produced a greater effect than the conversation. A man would feel rested coming home to a room and a wife like that.

Jock arrived at eight. Bob had not expected her, and had gone across to his mother's. She ate cold meat and bread in the solitary dining-room, waited on by an indifferent maid. By the time the meal was over, pride and jealousy were beginning to resume their sway. A glance into the work-room made Jock's heart sink; the disorder

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

of weeks was accumulated there. She went into Bob's den, and found it as musty and untidy. It was too late to have a fire lit. Jock made her way upstairs, and was struck with the confusion of the bedroom. And then, even while she was repenting, one of the old fits of stubbornness came on her, and she buried her face in the pillow and vowed she could never alter, and would never alter. There was nothing but wretchedness for one who had been born under an "onlucky star." This pleasant conviction had so strengthened after half an hour's brooding on the past, present, and future of her sad career, that Jock was impelled to rise and lock the door, and remain silent in response to Bob's knocking when he came back—not so very late by the clock, but late enough for the embers of Jock's wrath to have risen into a consuming fire.

When the knocking ceased, she proceeded to pity herself and him until she fell asleep through sheer exhaustion, and did not wake until the wintry sun was well up in the skies. Bob left the house at eight. She came downstairs in a perfect fever of remorse.

The picture of Martha in the studio had a most disturbing effect. Jock could not settle to her work this morning. Finally, she laid

## JOCK SPRING-CLEANS

down her tools and marched into the kitchen to find that the cook was taking her day out, and the youthful maid her ease, with a novelette, her feet upon the fender. The short command of a house-cleaning was such a thunder-clap that the girl followed Jock (broom over her shoulder) as if in tow of a resistless force. She was permitted to witness the cleaning of the work-room from the viewpoint of a super. It was Jock who swept, Jock who scrubbed, Jock who polished, Jock who collected rags and broken tools and bits of metal and cast them into the receptacle her trembling minion held. Down came the curtains, up went Jock, until each pane glittered like a diamond. And then, when nothing more could be cleaned or rubbed or scraped, Jock cast her eye on the furnace and the blow-pipe and the work-bench, and beheld them as blots on the fair face of her domain. One could not get away from their stern utilitarianism. The casement windows, the long, low room, the panelled walls were all defaced by the perpetual evidence of toil.

"I'll have some bread-and-cheese," commanded Jock. "Get yours at the same time. I'll do the other rooms directly."

Ruth came up mid-afternoon to be met by

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

a scared-eyed, smutty menial, who was still completely bouleversed by the "goings-on." Later, they would be assimilated, and issue in the form of folk-lore of eternal interest, to be handed from kitchen to kitchen and stable to barn; at present, the recorder was in the throes of the events that made the Saga, and could only gaze at Ruth with a perfectly blank expression, and when asked if her mistress was at home, stuttered out "Spring-cleaning." That it was November mattered nothing. Such cyclonic disturbance of the domestic routine came only at one time; besides, when ladies brushed floors and scrubbed paint and cleaned windows, the heavens metaphorically fell, and all things—seasons, planes and spheres—became chaos.

"You can come in," said Jock, appearing in the hall. "I'm having a bit of a turn-out, but I don't mind you. Get us some tea; we'll have it in the studio—I mean, the drawing-room." The frown that accompanied this latter piece of information reduced the maid to an open-mouthed condition, and she scuttered as if still driven by the force, while Jock conducted Ruth into the bare but shining room.

"Oh, how tidy!" cried Ruth.

"I'm in despair," said Jock, all tousle-

## JOCK SPRING-CLEANS

haired and dusty, and standing like a tragic figure in mid-floor.

"Why?" said Ruth.

"Look at that stove! Look at it!" said Jock, glaring at the offending end. "I've had the bench built in. I can't do a thing to it. Wherever you look, you see it. You can't sit down and take your ease in such a place. As well might a man stay in his office all night as come back to a room like this."

"Why don't you put a screen across?" said Ruth.

"I never thought of that," said Jock. "For that matter, screens are suspicious articles; you get a prejudice against them when you've lived amongst them; you know there's either crockery or old boots or clothes or tools behind them: something you want out of sight."

"Still, if you have to have your work-bench here," said Ruth.

"Why didn't I take the little room upstairs?" said Jock, sitting down on the packing-case divan which had graced the bed-sitting-room of her London days. "Why did I wilfully spoil the only decent room we had to live in?"

"A screen would help it ever so much for the present," said Ruth.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"If I can't have things right, I don't want them altered at all," said Jock shortly.

"I could lend you one from the work-room, easily," said Ruth, sitting down in the one arm-chair. "Do let me send it down. It would be nice to have the room quite comfortable—to-night."

Ruth stopped in time, before she said "when Bob comes home." A certain glance from Jock had warned her she must tread with care.

"It's my own work," continued Ruth; "I keep it as a pattern for the colour scheme, so you needn't mind experimenting with it."

"You're very kind," said Jock, confronted with a vision of the room with the offending end cut off, and finding the prospect "terribly" alluring. "I'll have the things out later, though; there's no sense in wasting all this space, where half would do."

"What a lovely old table! That's new, isn't it?" said Ruth.

"No," grunted Jock.

"I've never seen it," said Ruth.

"It's always had so many things on," said Jock. "For the same reason, you never saw that chair, nor yet the dresser. I'm going down to the village to get some flowers after tea. They brighten things up."

## JOCK · SPRING-CLEANS

"Oh, do let us——" began Ruth, and paused.

"Graham has some fine chrysanthemums," said Jock, refusing further aid with a definiteness that admitted of no entreaty. "How's your father? Martha says his arm's broken. I saw her yesterday."

"He's much better," said Ruth. "Didn't Bob tell you? He came in last night on his way to the station to meet your train."

Jock rose rather unnecessarily, and took the tea-tray from the maid. After a moment's transfixed silence for the registering of this proceeding, the latter withdrew for a further instalment of the meal.

"Didn't he tell you I was coming in this afternoon?" said Ruth, accepting tea unconsciously.

"No," said Jock. "Martha looked very well. I was sorry I didn't see Michael."

"Oh, didn't you?" said Ruth. "Didn't he get back to tea?"

"I don't know," said Jock. "I left before. I caught the earlier train."

"Oh, then Bob missed you," said Ruth, all solicitude.

"He was at his mother's when I came in," said Jock, eating the bread of bitterness. "I haven't seen him yet. I overslept this morning."

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"I'd no idea this was such a pretty room," said Ruth, drinking her tea with such a calm appearance that Jock marvelled at her denseness in spite of the relief it caused. "She can't feel," thought Jock. "It just amounts to that. She's like a flower in a glass case. There's never a breath of air blown on her."

Yet Ruth's appreciation was not unpleasing, and Jock accepted the offer of her company and walked down to the village, where the screen was viewed and accepted, together with a cushion Ruth insisted on bestowing. The chrysanthemums were packed on the same hand-cart, and Jock marched home beside it. The maid opened the front door and was met by the sight of the cart, and Jock, cutting the rope that bound the screen.

The influence of the "onlucky star" did indeed appear to hang round those immediately in Jock's orbit. When cook arrived soon after, the transformed house created such astonishment that the epic was harshly checked by, "Well, I only hope you'll take a lesson! Young gels want a mistress over them."

The mistress at that moment was completing the Protean change upstairs. The coat and skirt were hung up in the wardrobe; Jock, in her one white frock, was wondering if she



## JOCK SPRING-CLEANS

could sink to putting on her coral necklace. And then the gate opened, and Bob's footstep sounded on the walk, and it was too late to be found sewing in the transformed room. She could only stand like an idiot before the mirror, with such trembling fingers that the necklace would not fasten.

"Why——" said Bob's voice.

"I've been tidying up a bit," said Jock, dropping the necklace on the floor. "I got in such a mess, I changed. Don't trouble to pick that up; I don't know what I was doing, taking it out."

"I've seen the work-room," said Bob fastening the necklace on Jock with a hand that was trembling a little too. "Thank you."

"Oh, will they all say I've given in?" cried Jock, hiding her wrath and her shame against his shoulder; and found she had been gathered into safety.

"Is there any sense in being unhappy just because people, who don't know us, think we're going to be?" said Bob.

"We'll show them," said Jock, holding on as if she would never, never, never let go again. "Even if we've got to be happy the way they think will make us."

## CHAPTER VII

### VISITORS

THE curtains flapped in the March breeze. A fire crackled on the open hearth-place, its flames reflected in the surrounding tiles. They were white, like the walls and curtains; even the matting was of a creamy colour, and the chairs and big settee were upholstered in soft grey and bound with blue. Bowls of growing daffodils, narcissi, and tulips stood about the room, and Martha looked up from her desk and felt refreshed by the peace and brightness.

The room was free from the usual array of photographs and knick-knacks. A fine cast of the Victory of Samothrace hung over the mantelpiece, and a band of pictures glowed along one wall, but the flowers were left to bloom against uninterrupted surfaces; and the hills and red ploughed fields beyond the garden peeped in through the casement curtains.

## VISITORS

Martha returned to her letters, though the worry was not quite dispelled. The maid had given notice a fortnight ago on account of her impending marriage, and Martha had not heard of a substitute. When her husband appeared, the feeling of refreshment was renewed. His presence made all things bearable, even household problems.

"It's not one o'clock?" said Martha.

"No; but it isn't worth while beginning my new subject before lunch," said Michael, going down on the floor by Martha and putting his arm round her in a very delightful way.

"What are we doing?"

"Well, I'm afraid we're worrying a little at the moment," Martha confided. "Every one who's answered the advertisement wants such enormous wages. It really looks as if we shall have to give more than we have been doing."

"I suppose we must, then," said her husband, stroking the dark hair gently.

"If you accept the commission of the portrait, of course we should be able to," said Martha; but her brow was still lined, and she continued, with a sigh: "If only it had been a more inspiring person! I wonder why Lord Mayors in full dress are uninteresting."

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

Keene put his face down against Martha's shoulder, and held her to him and said nothing.

"I don't believe you want to do it," said Martha, in a flash of prescience.

"I must do it," said Keene.

"Why?" asked Martha. "There must be other work for you to do."

"Unfortunately, there's nothing certain at the moment, except this," said Keene, in a muffled voice. "It's all right; everybody has to do these things."

"You shan't do it, you shan't!" said Martha, in a passion of protection. "I'm sure a man like Mr. Stevenage could put something different in your way. He's an R.A., and has influence. Didn't a letter come from him this morning? I thought I saw his writing."

"Yes," said Keene, and got up and faced Martha. "He did suggest some work, dear; but I can't afford to do it."

"Why not?" said Martha.

"It's not certain," said Keene. "It's an open competition for the frescoes of the Middletown City Hall. Of course it would be glorious if I got the job; but I have to prepare the cartoons, and I'd need models, and at least six months' uninterrupted work; and then I mightn't win."

## VISITORS

"You couldn't do the portrait as well, in between?" asked Martha.

"No. The cartoons must be in by September. I should have to put everything aside at once," said Keene.

"And Mr. Stevenage wants you to," said Martha.

"He's always been very decent," said Keene. "And, you see, he doesn't know I'm married."

There was the faintest trace of sadness in his tone; Martha's heart gave a throb and almost stopped.

"Oh, Michael!" said she. "Oh, Michael!" and put her hands across her breast as if to hold the pain.

"Darling, I didn't mean——" cried Keene.

"You did mean!" said Martha. "If you'd been alone, you would have gone in for it."

"Dearest, what's the use of thinking of what I could have done," said Keene. "I have a house and wife and home now, and they're worth keeping. I've decided to accept the portrait job, so you needn't worry your head about the salary. Give what you like, as long as you find some one who will make us comfortable."

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"How much have we in the bank?" said Martha.

"Oh, I don't know. About fifty pounds," said Keene. "But that doesn't matter. They'll pay a hundred down before I start the work. I made that a condition when they asked my terms."

"Fifty pounds," said Martha. "And the house is ours, and the garden." She glanced out where the kitchen garden lay, sown and planted, beyond the hedge. "Michael," said she, pushing back all the letters, "if I did everything myself, I believe we could get through. Will you let me—somehow—manage? I won't say how, exactly, but I'll undertake to keep this house for six months on that fifty pounds."

"My darling!" said her husband, staring as if her words were impossible to comprehend. "You do the work! Do you think I'd let my wife——"

"You will, if you love me," cried Martha. "I married you to help. Let me, dearest. The chance of the work you want to do has come. Let me help you to do it. We won't count upon your winning; we'll enjoy the next six months as an experiment in what each of us can do. I'll show a *magnum opus*

## VISITORS

at the end, even though it's only taking care of you."

"Only!" said Michael, and gathered up his wife into one big embrace. "But I can't let you; how can I? You couldn't scrub."

"I'd love it," said Martha, with shining eyes.

"You couldn't cook," said Keene.

"And wash, and bake, and dust, and mend," chanted Martha in an ascending litany. "Why not? I'm as strong as Joan; and the work to her is only the day's round; but it will be work for you, to me. Oh, darling, let me help to build with you, even though I only build at the foundation."

"Do you really think we could get through?" said Keene, looking into Martha's eyes as one who searched for help from some one whom he trusted; and in the look, betraying his longing for the opportunity that had come. "There's a little more than fifty, I believe; but what about visitors?"

"We shan't have any when Ruth's gone," said Martha. "Mr. Fowles is going to-day; and I don't count Ruth a visitor; she'll help me to plan. I am glad Joan will be here for her two weeks; I couldn't let Ruth do the work again. You'll see everything will work

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

out right. The one thing I thought I had to give up has been given back to me."

"What?" asked her husband, mystified by the glory in the eyes that met his.

"A great ambition!" answered Martha. "Something definitely difficult. I'd been feeling my part was a little humdrum. But now, I'll have as much to do as any one can wish; and the way the work can be done is unlimited in its possibilities; and it doesn't end in the success of my work: what I achieve will be built into your frescoes. You'll think more easily if I keep everything harmonious round you, won't you?"

"Oh, I do thank you," said Keene, and held his wife to him with humility and love and courage all together.

"Hush! Here's Mr. Fowles," said Martha warningly, and resumed her seat, while Keene sauntered to the window and hailed the owner of the approaching whistle.

"Where have you been all the morning?" he called out, as Fowles strolled up to the window and leant in.

"At your most charming parents'," said he. There was rather more than usual coolness about his manner—almost as if he were self-conscious, and was endeavouring to conceal the fact.



## VISITORS

"What have they got to say for themselves?" said Keene. Fowles noticed the radiance that shone from him and Martha; she was dropping letters into the waste-paper basket, but her smiling eyes were paying attention to the conversation. There was really a wonderful sense of peace and happiness in domesticity as certain people lived it.

"All that was delightful," answered Fowles. "I had the great pleasure of escorting your mother round her poultry-yard, and then I sat in the linen-room while she darned. It is extraordinary how pleasantly contagious industry can be. When I left I felt as if I had done a thoroughly good morning's work."

"Perhaps you had," said Martha. "You enlivened the morning for mother. She likes to talk to people while she is sewing."

"You reassure me," said Fowles, avoiding the encounter of their eyes. "As a matter of fact, I have something to break to you. I'm not going to be entirely removed from the scene. I went up to your people this morning to ask if they knew of rooms. I have no excuse except the shameless one of not wanting to leave. I can't pretend I am seized with a desire to jot down the landscape, because

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

I respect your intelligence. To cut all semblance of excuses short, your mother has insisted on my staying there. I was really touched." Fowles came to a sudden conclusion, and examined the curtain hem.

"My dear fellow, we could have made room," said Keene. "I never dreamed you'd care to stay on."

"It's so quiet here," said Martha.

"I'm sure I don't know why the place has such a fascination," said Fowles, with an engaging artlessness that made Martha suddenly turn red. Danger confuses some, but emboldens others. Fowles fixed his eyes on Martha as he continued, "And 't isn't cheerful at home. I must confess to a horror of illness. It isn't as if I could do anything. No one's allowed in at the Nursing Home where my father is; and my mother's gone down to Brighton; and there's absolutely nothing to do but kick one's heels and start at the sound of each knock for fear it should be a telegram."

"Of course you mustn't go back," said Keene, and his words were echoed by Martha, restored to sympathy if not to complete ease. The fact remained that Ruth arrived that afternoon.

## VISITORS

Fowles had arranged to transfer his belongings and himself after tea, so he was there to greet Ruth on her arrival and took charge of her teacup with an air of possession that quickened Martha's suspicions, even though Fowles seemed content to look at Ruth and listen to the simple home news. But after tea a walk was suggested, and Fowles took up his position beside Ruth and dropped behind Martha and Keene as a matter of course. He had stayed to see Ruth, and now that she had come, proceeded to gratify his wish for her company as simply as he gratified any other desire that seized him.

The sun was hanging low and red over the ploughed fields and leafless woods, and the air was fresh and melting, coming in fragrant gusts which breathed of flowers folded in the earth, and rain cloud-imprisoned. There was a tumultuous feel abroad: a stirring of dead branches, a joyous murmuring of something big and riotous. Ruth held her head erect and stepped more freely than her wont. Fowles' presence had been a great surprise; now that they had met she found the strange intimacy was unbroken. Everything became more interesting through his presence; and the pleasure his company had given in the

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

studio was incomparably increased in this more congenial atmosphere.

As a gust caught at her hair and sent a golden strand across her brow, she glanced up in happy understanding.

"Isn't it a glorious day?" said she.

"I was thinking how windy it was," said Fowles.

"Oh, I love the wind," Ruth answered. "It clears everything away; and there are such a lot of scents in it to-day: rain, and sea, and leaf-mould, and flowers, and growing things."

"This wind suggests nothing to me but the need of a hat-string," said Fowles. "How do you keep yours on?"

"I was thinking of taking it off," Ruth confessed. They paused to allow the operation. Martha and Keene had been only a few steps ahead; when Ruth's hat was off they were well up the road.

"Don't hurry," said Fowles in his authoritative voice. "I want a talk with you. I've stayed on purpose to see you."

This announcement appeared to give him sole rights in Ruth's company. So firm was the conviction that it impressed Ruth.

"Sit down on that stile," said Fowles.

## VISITORS

"I can't talk properly while I'm clutching on to my hat, and everything's flapping."

"But what about Martha?" said Ruth.

"Oh, they'll have enough of you after," said Fowles, guiding their way to the stile. "Can you get up yourself?"

Ruth could; and soon was perched on the top bar next to Fowles. The uplands rolled away in graceful curves before them; behind lay a spinney, sheltering them in some measure from the wind. The hedge stretched forth embracing branches, so that again a sense of privacy encircled them; and Ruth, a little dazed, felt as if no time had intervened since their last meeting: they had apparently stepped into one of those sudden friendships that come sometimes, especially when people are young.

"I'm awfully worried," said her companion, and Ruth heard the cry of a man in need.

"But you always are," said Ruth, trying to keep the flood of pity in properly suppressed proportion. She was aided by the fact that she could not give undivided attention to her companion. Martha and Keene might wait for them; even return. How dreadful if they did! Ruth coloured at the thought of such a possibility.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"I'm always unhappy ; I'm not always worried," said Fowles, turning on her almost savagely. "For goodness' sake, don't think whether you ought to be here. I haven't had a soul to speak to since I met you. I'd looked forward to seeing more of you, and then you went off, most unnecessarily. I needed you far more than your father did. Now I've bothered to stay on, I'm going to see something of you ; and as I'm not staying in the same house, I shall have to seize my opportunities, no matter when or how they come. I've got one now, and I'm going to use it ; so do let us have all the good we can out of it."

The irritation in the speaker's voice precluded any embarrassment which might otherwise have wakened. Ruth returned his gaze, and said, "What do you want to talk about ?"

"You know the proposition I placed before you at our last meeting," said Fowles. "Supposing such a man was facing the fear of his supply being cut off ? Supposing his people were in a tight place, financially ? Supposing a smash came and he found himself with nothing ? What would you advise, but shoot himself ?"

## VISITORS

"I certainly shouldn't advise that," said Ruth, trying not to laugh at the extreme unexpectedness of the conclusion.

"You don't understand," said Fowles, infuriated at such levity. "I mean what I say. Something's gone wrong; I don't know what. My father's down at a Nursing Home. My mother's doing a round of house-parties. My quarter's allowance wasn't paid into my bank last week. I wrote to the solicitor and got a letter that made me go up to see him. He can't tell me; he won't tell me. My father may pull round; but he's in a tight corner. If anything happens to him now—just at this time——"

Fowles broke off. He had certainly gained Ruth's attention. He was scarcely conscious of her; the fear that had been haunting him had grown into monstrous proportions now it had been voiced.

"What does Michael say?" asked Ruth.

"I haven't told him," said Fowles, staring across the barren fields; the sun would sink behind the desolate ridges in a few moments.

"But why not?" she persisted.

"Why should I worry him?" said Fowles. "He and your sister haven't a care or an anxiety; I couldn't repay their kindness

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

by bringing the ghost of a shadow into their home. No. I've no one I could tell but you ; and when I heard you were coming I felt I couldn't go when you were so near. I knew you'd forgive me for reaching out ; you do, don't you ? ”

“ Oh yes,” said Ruth. “ But I wish you'd tell Michael. He is so clear-sighted.”

“ That's just it,” said Fowles beneath his breath. “ He's been trained to stand alone ; he'd see nothing in what I'm going through. He couldn't understand ; and if I began to try to make him see, he'd see me as some one who was whining for pity. But you see things differently, because you're a woman. I don't want pity ; but I want some one who'll listen while I talk. Then a way out may come. I want to think of one ; I don't ask you to show it me. I only ask you to listen.”

“ Oh, if it's any good, of course I will,” said Ruth. “ And of course there's a way out. Don't you think, sometimes, we get our lives into such a mess that there has to be a big upheaval to free us properly ? You weren't happy, were you ? You wanted to do something ! Perhaps this is just the needful impetus.”

“ You are a very cheering person,” said



## VISITORS

Fowles, who had turned towards Ruth, frankly resting in the pleasure of being with her. "Most people would have told me things might right themselves. Do you know, you're rather intelligent?"

"I don't think it's worth while staying here to talk about me," said Ruth. "Don't you think we might go on? It seems rude to Mrs. Keene if we come in late when you're going to stay there."

"I suppose living in the country makes you so punctilious," said Fowles, not appreciating Ruth's descent, and showing it. "You know, you're one mass of conventions; you think of nothing else but what other people will be thinking or expecting of you."

"One must think of what is due to other people, if one is to be bearable in one's relations with them," said Ruth, rather involved and flushed, and walking along quickly.

The sun had dropped, and the trees and hedges were losing form and colour. Martha and Keene had vanished; the road stretched in front, long and empty.

"By that, I gather that you mean I'm not," said Fowles, keeping very close beside her.

"I wasn't thinking about you, for once," said Ruth, almost annoyed.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"For once?" said Fowles.

Ruth bit her lip; his tone suggested a humour that she did not like.

"You think that's in bad taste?" said Fowles, lounging along and speaking with delicate detachment.

"Yes," Ruth returned, with uncompromising honesty.

"I didn't mean to be," said Fowles. "It's just the fate that dogs me, who's determined to keep me from the only hand held out. Do you know you held out your hand? Metaphorically; don't blush! That day in the kitchen, when you told me it mattered to you whether I kept my word?"

"How do you mean?" said Ruth in a low voice.

"It was the first time any one had cared badly whether I did what was right," said Fowles. "You cared badly. No one had ever thought it their business before; no one."

"Michael cares," said Ruth.

"No, he doesn't," said Fowles. "He likes me as I am. You like me enough to want me to be different. Don't you?"

"Yes," said Ruth.

"So, in a perfectly futile and hopeless and idiotic way, I'm trying to be different,"

## VISITORS

answered Fowles. "I don't think I've made the least headway; but still I try, intermittently. I've been to see your Cousin Dollie, for instance. Has she told you?"

"No," Ruth said. The news confirmed the growing fear that Dollie was withholding confidence; she had come home for Christmas apparently delighted with the prospects of the showroom, although few results in the way of sales had been obtained. Since her return her letters had been few, and though they spoke of possible orders from imposing quarters, they always ended with a request for money.

"That's a labour of love, I can assure you," said Fowles, so ill-temperedly that Ruth glanced up.

"I mean, to you," he explained. "I thought I was pretty egotistic, but I'm nothing to your cousin. You'd think she ran the world from Thimble Street; and what she doesn't know about the principles of decoration and art and industry might go on the back of a postage stamp and leave plenty of room for the gum. My head swims sometimes. She really gives me indigestion. You don't know what it is, or perhaps you do, to dine with her."

"Do you see much of her?" said Ruth,

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

wondering that Dollie had never mentioned Fowles.

"I take her to dinner, religiously, once a fortnight, and give her a good square meal," said Fowles, almost vindictively. "I quite agree with you that she's starving herself."

"She isn't, is she?" cried Ruth.

"She has that look that girls have when they live on buns," said Fowles. "Still, she gets a good meal every second Friday; I keep that date, whatever happens. I made a vow to myself. It's the least I can do."

His voice had dropped to a more gentle note.

"The very least," he said. "I wish there was more. Do set me things to do. I'm sure that helps."

"Don't talk as you do about Dollie," answered Ruth, with unexpected courage.

"But you must see what she is," said Fowles. "The most gentle nature couldn't work with her and stay deluded."

"She's very young," defended Ruth, "and very much in earnest; but those aren't bad qualities. And, as she says, you must have concentration to succeed. I think Dollie's set herself a colossal task, and is trying to achieve success heroically."

## VISITORS

"Heroically!" said Fowles, and then, glancing down at the uplifted profile with its purity and trust, kept silent on a matter that might have brought illumination of an unpleasant kind.

"Well, your faith in your cousin may help her as much as your belief in my good qualities helps me," said Fowles, and noticed the flush that crept into Ruth's cheek.

They had reached the bottom of the hill on which stood the house of the elder Keenes, and Fowles slackened his step. So soon, the walk would be over!

"I told you Fate, or whatever you like to call it, is trying to keep me from you, didn't I?" said he. "D'you know, I've a feeling this is our last talk. It's as if I were in a net, and when I try to reach up and get out, the net tightens. But I'm going to come through. You've held out your hand and I've taken it, and I'm never going to let go till you've pulled me out. Is that in bad taste?"

"I don't know," said Ruth. "I'd like it to be true."

"So would I," said Fowles. "And it shall be true. It is true! There's the Keenes' hedge; I shan't have you to myself again

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

to-night; I'm glad I seized my chance. You've been such a help."

"I've done nothing," cried Ruth.

"Oh yes, you have," said Fowles, striding along with all his usual assurance. "You've destroyed the fear. I can face what's coming. What did you say? The upheaval's going to be the impetus to fire me out of the net. I don't want any more help than that idea."

The yew hedge had loomed up. Ruth entered the gate and ascended the stone steps and found herself being greeted by the Keenes in the fire-lit hospitable sitting-room. She had stepped back into ordinary life again.

Yet not quite ordinary, for the home in which Ruth found herself was so delightful that the memory of the windy walk was almost eclipsed.

Michael's parents looked like old portraits against the panelled walls, Adam fireplaces, and Sheraton furniture. A beautiful stillness surrounded them, in which their kindly, hospitable faces shone like stars. Martha and Michael were looking at some lichens Mr. Keene had found; the candles lit up their interested faces as the three bent over the table. Mrs. Keene welcomed Ruth as if she were another daughter, and Fowles dropped

## VISITORS

into the corner of the settle and watched them all as if he were enjoying a picture. Only the people in this one were not unconscious of his presence. Mr. Keene had come forward to greet them, Martha and Michael sent smiles across, and Mrs. Keene's eyes rested on him with the gentle, loving look that soothed and cheered together. Fowles wondered if Ruth would grow into such another home-maker and wife and mother, and fancied he saw the same light in the youthful face. Ruth moved as softly too.

When Martha and Ruth and Michael rose preparatory to going, Fowles felt no sense of loss. The mere fact that people went out of this atmosphere could not break the peace. Yet as he said good-bye, his hand tightened upon Ruth's as if they were parting for a longer time than a single night; and Ruth's clasp was firm, as if to say, "Take courage."

Next day old Mr. Keene brought down the news that Fowles had been summoned back to London; his father's condition had changed for the worse.

Martha's regrets were somewhat conventional. She was relieved that Fowles had left. His attitude to Ruth had been decidedly disquieting.

## CHAPTER VIII

### LOVE AMONGST THE RUINS

**I**T was one of those delicious days that sometimes come straight out of summer into the midst of May. Everything was pushing up eager to unfurl its wealth of leaf and blossom. Lupins, larkspur, phlox, and columbine stood in bosky clumps amongst the earlier flowers, the gillies, hyacinths, and tulips, which made the garden gay. Boxes crammed with little plants were set upon the walk ; everywhere the promise of spring !

The mistress of the garden was busy with a trowel ; one after another the seedlings were established in rows and circles and clusters. Her sleeves were rolled up to her elbow, for her gown was fresh in honour of the day. She was not unlike an early rose in her crisp pink print ; and when the latch of the gate clicked she raised a face as smiling.

" Well, I can see you're at home," said the caller.



## LOVE AMONGST THE RUINS

"Come in," said Jock. "You can pull the plants out for me. I'm going to have these beds one nosegay of every kind of stock."

Ruth came across the grass and knelt down in her quiet manner. Every movement breathed repose.

"It's nice to see you," said Jock. "You always make me feel there's nothing to do in the world but grow. That's comforting, when one's confronted with the incessant attention flowers require at growing-time."

"Still, a garden is a reward," said Ruth, looking round the well-filled borders. "And isn't it nice that you've started with an old garden? Everything you do now counts for so much more against what has been done."

"Yes; flowers never look hearty in a brand-new garden," Jock assented. "They don't seem rooted even when they make a show."

"No," said Ruth. "I do love old houses, and old gardens, and old china, and old people." She was separating the tiny seedlings with her usual daintiness, but there was the faintest shadow over the gentle face.

"You look tired," said Jock. "I suppose you've been at the workroom all day. Sit down and do nothing."

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"I like taking out these little plants," said Ruth. "I'm not tired, either."

"How are things going?" asked Jock, rather perfunctorily, because a Greek cross was being arranged.

"We're not very busy now," said Ruth, finding her work needed close attention too.

"Oh? I thought Dollie said the London season would be a big tax," said Jock.

Ruth remained silent.

"How is she getting on?" said Jock, rising to her knees and giving herself a stretch.

"She gives me no more news than she does Aunt Margaret," said Ruth. "I expect you've heard it all."

"We hear the bare fact that she's about to make a fortune," replied Jock; "but it seems time now that more details were supplied. When she went up the fortune was to be made by Christmas; then it was shifted to the season. How is she getting on? I don't mean prospectively; I mean, actually."

"I expect she's told you all she wants you to know," said Ruth, bending her head still lower.

"You have, my dear," said Jock, plumping down to her work again. She moved on as she spoke and addressed Ruth from the opposite side of the bed. "I've always had my

## LOVE AMONGST THE RUINS

doubts, for I know Thimble Street, and I know the London market. You were doing the right thing when you sent the work to Exhibitions, and were building up your private customers. But directly you start to sell work to the shops at trade prices you're working on a different basis. Your designs will never catch the general commercial public : they're too quiet and refined. Dollie's been ambitious, and she's made a mistake."

"Her confidence doesn't seem at all diminished," said Ruth. "In fact, her letters grow more and more certain, though——" Ruth stopped rather uncomfortably.

"Who's paying for her rooms?" said Jock bluntly.

"We are," said Ruth. "They are our London showroom and office. Dollie can scarcely be said to live in them."

"I suppose she has to eat," said Jock.

"But almost nothing," said Ruth. "Far the most serious part of the expense is the printing and postage."

"And what does she use printing for?" asked Jock.

"She has to send out circulars to make it known," faltered Ruth. "Advertisements don't do enough."

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"She doesn't advertise?" asked Jock.

"She says it's necessary in the ladies' papers," said Ruth. "You see, it isn't as if Thimble Street is a main thoroughfare."

"From what you say she'll soon bring up the cost of her establishment to that of a shop in Piccadilly," said Jock. "No one can draw a London showroom and attendant and circulars wholesale and advertisements in newspapers out of a Village Industry like yours. You spend like that when you've a factory behind you. Why, all your things are hand-made and the best materials. People won't pay enough to give you profits that will include such outlay."

"I wish you could see Dollie," said Ruth, raising eyes which no longer concealed the gravity of her problem. "Couldn't you go in when you next are up?"

"She'd have sandwichmen out if I expressed a tenth of what I've said to you," said Jock, patting in the plants with perfectly resigned acceptance of her sister-in-law's attitude. "If I wanted to restrain her, I'd have to go in and say she wasn't doing enough; only the worst of that would be she might feel she had to prove she was. I can't mix up in it at all; for Dollie's like a ferret watching out for inter-

## LOVE AMONGST THE RUINS

ference, as she knows that I know something of the real conditions. Of course you're all so wonderfully confiding. You should hear her mother talk. Every word that Dollie sends her is as gospel truth. I sit sometimes and marvel something doesn't fall from heaven to arouse your innocent suspicions ! Dollie's made a ghastly failure, and she must know it ; and the thing that's bothering me is the same that's bothering her : how is she going to climb down ? ”

“ Are you really sure ? ” said Ruth.

“ How much reserve fund have you left ? ” asked Jock.

“ Nothing,” murmured Ruth.

“ What are you running the Industry on ? ” asked Jock.

“ I've been advancing some money I had by me, but it's come to an end,” said Ruth. “ The last paid this week's wages. Now we want materials, and I don't like having bills. Dollie says my scruples are absurd ; but we've always paid our way ; and we shall need money for next week.”

“ How does Dollie suggest that will be met ? ” asked Jock.

“ She writes that we must turn the Industry into a private company and get our

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

people to take shares," said Ruth. "But the local sales are falling off now Dollie's gone; and it doesn't seem honest to ask people to invest their money."

"Especially when they're not particularly appreciative of the object for which their money's to be lost," said Jock drily.

"Father has been quite different since the London place was started. We never dare to mention it or Dollie," said poor Ruth.

"Your aunt and Bob are not exactly pleased at the idea," said Jock. "Bob says if she'd taken a place at Peter Robinson's she'd have had far more opportunity of exercising will-power on the customers."

"Oh, Jock, don't laugh!" cried Ruth. "She says she must have money for the rent: it seems it's been accumulating; and she says she's tried to pawn some of the work for food; but she gets nothing practically. I've given my last shilling to the girls to-day, and then had to pay short money. I can't go to father; and if I tell the true state of affairs to Aunt Margaret she would insist on closing down and Dollie coming home."

"And isn't that what's got to happen?" said Jock. "Why not now instead of keeping up a few more weeks of desperation?"

## LOVE AMONGST THE RUINS

"If that has to be done I think Dollie would rather write herself," said Ruth in a low voice. "But she is depending on me to find some way of helping her."

"To bolster up her pride," concluded Jock drily. "That's all you're worrying to do. Is it worth it, either for you or Dollie? I don't think so; but then, pride has never brought me anything but trouble yet, so perhaps I speak as a burnt child."

"Oh, I know; and yet I can't desert her when she's in such need," cried Ruth, leaving the seedlings huddled in the box. "I *know* how she's feeling."

"That feeling's got to come out of her before she'll feel any better," said Jock, becoming very Irish but astonishingly explicit. "I don't believe you're really being a friend by helping to keep her in a false position. My advice would be to leave her alone now you've come to the end of your resources."

"I know that might be wise, but it's impossible to do it," said Ruth, and Jock experienced a slight shock. She had always thought Ruth weak; but she was remaining faithful when the most deluded person would have let go. And the curious thing was that

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

Ruth knew Dollie's failings. She was, in fact, not deluded at all.

She had refused to collect money for the Industry as Dollie had requested. No. Ruth was not exactly in the toils of illusion.

"What I don't understand," Jock confessed, "is what good do you think you're doing if you find more money? You know you can't support her there for ever."

"Yes," said Ruth; "but we're partners. Dollie would stand by me in anything."

"Hum!" said Jock rather drily. "She'd discover a way out if you'd put her in a hole; though I don't know that she'd submit it for your approval."

"I know," repeated Ruth, and rose up and remained for a moment gazing over the wealth of flowers that stood out against the yew hedge and pressed above the neat-clipped borders.

"What are you going to do?" asked Jock, putting down her trowel and coming up to Ruth.

"Trust," said Ruth, in a voice so low it was scarcely more than a sigh. "There's nothing else I can do."

"You could go and tell her mother," said Jock with a shrug of her shoulders, as if to disclaim all personal responsibility.



## LOVE AMONGST THE RUINS

"I don't think that would be right," said Ruth, very quietly, and said good-bye and went out, while Jock wondered that she had not been asked to keep silent. Then it dawned on her that Ruth had never even contemplated the possibility of Jock betraying the position—not even to her own husband, for wasn't he Dollie's brother, and if he knew would feel it his duty to act.

Somehow, Jock felt honoured by the confidence. As she planted and patted, the conviction came that Ruth was one of the people whose friendship one wears as an adornment, as well as for use.

Jock had helped Ruth in one way, if only by confirming her pretty definite suspicions as to the wisdom of Dollie's course of action. It was plain that the situation could not continue, and Ruth was reduced to the need of determining her own part of the problem. At the moment the carrying on of the Industry appeared highly uncertain. Ruth had not left Dollie in any misunderstanding as to the gravity of the position; and though Dollie had decreased her demands for money during the last weeks, it now turned out that she had merely been deferring the meeting of her obligations, and the accumulation had to be

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

reckoned with in a lump sum. It would be idle to deny that this revelation of Dollie's "diplomacy" had come as a shock.

Juggle with figures and facts as cleverly as she might, Dollie could not evade an eventual point where truth would out, and where all her explanations, arguments, and forecasts could not controvert the one plain fact that they had come to an end of their resources.

But granting all the uncertainty, all the misplaced enthusiasm, all the wrong impressions which are given by a person who is so certain things are going to happen that she announces the highly problematical as certain—or even already achieved—there were Dollie and the Industry penned up in a corner from which there seemed no possible escape.

The sunshine lay on hedge and meadow, the breeze played amongst the wild flowers, swinging bell and cup and moving the grasses in gentle rhythmic waves. A wonderful tenderness and bounty were in the air; the apple trees were clad in a soft cloud of blossom; lime and ash and oak were gay. Everywhere life was unfolding in harmonious manifestations; prodigally, indeed! There was no sense of lack in the message of the fields and orchards.

## LOVE AMONGST THE RUINS

"Lift up your eyes and look on the fields," thought Ruth, "for they are white *already* to harvest. If God clothed the grass, He will clothe us in just what we need ; He knows what we need, too. If He can give all this life and beauty to the earth, how silly it is to fear His power can't support the Industry ! A way will open for me to pay the wages, easily ; we know that honesty is God's will for His children. If God is governing us all, I'm being afraid of nothing ! Love wouldn't make us suffer when we've done the best we know ; and God is Love."

A path led across the meadows to Ruth's home, and she leant upon the gate which opened into it. The sun was still high, although the light was becoming gentler. The grasses shone as the sun-rays filtered through ; and the buttercups glittered like a sheet of beaten gold. "Oh, I'll trust !" said Ruth. "I'll trust ! I know that God is good ; I know God loves us."

She lifted up her eyes in gratitude—yes, gratitude for all the beauty that was spread so bountifully for her to see and rest in and be cheered by.

"Thank you for the message," murmured Ruth, and put out her hand to push the field

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

gate open. Then as it swung and she moved forward, a swift tread sounded on the road, and turning, she stood face to face with Fowles.

She was too surprised to speak. For a moment she glanced up and down the highway, as if to seek some explanation for his presence; then her gaze returned to him to ask it.

"Why?" said Ruth, for Fowles was remaining silent. Then she noted he was pale and had an old, drawn look, and pity softened her eyes to greater gentleness as he said:

"I suppose you heard my father's dead?"

"Yes," said Ruth. "Martha wrote to me."

"I thought she would," said Fowles. "Were you going on?" He nodded towards the field path. "May I come with you? I was going up to the house when I saw you here. Lucky, wasn't it? The first bit of luck that's come to me for a very long time."

"This is a short way to the house," said Ruth, turning towards the gate; the deep-set eyes under the gaunt brow were burning with a desperate fire. He looked like a man who was being driven, hunted; she was repelled by the fever which had gripped him,

## LOVE AMONGST THE RUINS

while his need drew all her tenderness and sympathy.

He did not disclose his purpose at once, but strolled beside her on the narrow path, speaking occasionally of the beauties round them. It was not till they reached the wood-gate that he paused. The lilies were out; waves of white rippled up amongst the tree-roots, sweeping in a great flood down the more open spaces, and exhaling a fragrance that quickened the pulse, as though the wood were living at its fullest, and one thrilled in sympathy.

"To think all this is going on while men live penned in cities," said Fowles in a deep breath. "One can see the sense of life as those flowers live it; there's beauty in it; they aren't doing it themselves; they're living easily. And then look at us and the mess and muddle we've created."

"The world that God created was all good," said Ruth.

"I've yet to become acquainted with it, then," said Fowles.

"Why, there it is," said Ruth, nodding to the wood. "The lilies of the field. We never planted them. We never gave them life. We never even planned them. I don't know

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

how they came to be if God never thought of them."

"How did we come to be?" asked Fowles. "I never planned myself or made my life. It would have been different if I had."

"Don't you think we can always live the way God wants us to if we want to?" murmured Ruth. "But don't we sometimes think that way doesn't promise as much pleasure as our own way does; and so perhaps we say we must look after our oxen, or that we are married to something or other, and therefore cannot come. I don't believe any one who has honestly tried to live up to his highest light all his life has anything to reproach God for. Think of the peace of mind which one would have if one had nothing to blame oneself for."

"Have you anything?" asked Fowles.

"Yes, indeed. Being afraid of hurting people's feelings is my trouble," answered Ruth. "I'm a coward. I know people are acting unwisely, even wrongly, but I can't bear taking a firm stand, because it seems unkind, even though in my heart I know that by letting them go on I am encouraging them, and indirectly causing innocent people to suffer. But it is the most difficult thing in the world to have to stand up for what you

## LOVE AMONGST THE RUINS

know to be right when it means displeasing people whom you love."

"That's funny," said Fowles. "Oh, that's funny!" He drew a deep breath as he spoke, and leaning his arms upon the bar steadied himself against it, as though bracing for an ordeal.

"What is?" asked Ruth, drawing back a step and looking at him, rather surprised.

"Your problem's mine," said Fowles, with tightened lips and eyes that searched the wood in vain for comfort. "Just mine. It is pretty difficult to take the step that will cut you off from the people you want to be with, the people that naturally belong to you, the one person who has ever been of any help, who is the only inspiration that's ever come into your life."

"Doing right has never cut any one off from good," said Ruth. "He makes a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. Oh, I don't know *why* we don't go on and trust."

"Can He make a way in the wilderness of snobbery? Can He make rivers in the desert of poverty and isolation?" asked Fowles, his bitter gaze resting upon Ruth.

"Nothing is impossible to God," said Ruth.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Nothing! He prepares the table in the presence of the enemies. You can't lose anything by going forward when once you see the way. The difficulty is, sometimes one doesn't see. I suppose because our own fears blind us. But if one waits the light comes, and then one must go on."

"Did your sister tell you my father had been speculating secretly for years, and left absolutely nothing?" said Fowles, in a deadly quiet voice. "And that my mother has had nervous prostration in consequence of the shock of finding there's nothing to support her? And that I've got to earn enough for both of us? I!"

"The way will open," said Ruth, a little paler, but clasping her hands more tightly. The more hopeless the position seemed, the more one had to "Be still, and *know* that I am God."

"It's always the way out," faltered Ruth. "Out, into something better. We have to go through the Red Sea, but the waves rise up and form a wall and we go through easily, if we only keep right on."

"There'd be something rather splendid in marching down to the sea and going straight in," said Fowles; "especially when the



## LOVE AMONGST THE RUINS

waves rose up mountains high and you marched through. But I don't think even you could see anything inspiring in my way out. The way has been quite clearly shown. That's the worst of it. I haven't the shadow of a doubt as to what I ought to do."

"What is it?" asked Ruth.

"Keene's father has interested himself enough to get me the offer of buyer to a furniture shop—upholsterers, or whatever you call it. They make a speciality of antiques. I have to go round to sales and people's houses, and to be in the showroom to consult with people who want their houses decorated. I believe I go to the houses when the order is sufficiently important."

"How beautiful!" said Ruth. "Oh, could there have been anything suggested for which you were better fitted!" Her face had lit up with surprise and joy. She still clasped her hands, but as if she were giving thanks. "Oh, how the waves roll back!" she murmured.

"My dear girl, do you understand it's a shop?" said Fowles. "A plain glass-fronted shop, with departments and counters and assistants, not even in London. I shall wear a frock-coat, and look exactly like any other

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

of the estimable young men who are selling beds and towels and toilet-ware ; but I shall receive three hundred pounds a year with the prospect of what is known as ' rises,' if I give satisfaction. I don't live in, but my quarters are at the back of the premises. I think they're dignified by the name of a house. I told my mother so at least. You and I have possibly the strength to face the fact that to all intents and purposes I shall reside in part of the ' establishment.' "

" Have you been ? " said Ruth.

" Oh yes, and I'm approved," said Fowles, " after a searching examination by a cast-iron old gentleman with a knowledge of china that was almost equal to my own. I beat him on English ware, but my knowledge of the Chinese dynasties was rudimentary compared with his. He has also a sound taste in fabrics. He leaves me out of sight when it comes to business knowledge and moral principle, both of which he expressed himself as ready to impart. I thanked him for the offer of the first."

" What did he say ? " said Ruth, with a dimpling smile.

" That it didn't matter which I decided I was willing to receive," said Fowles. " From

## LOVE AMONGST THE RUINS

the twinkle in his eyes I gathered they amounted to the same thing in his opinion."

"He sounds very nice," said Ruth.

"Only, you see, I've been brought up among people who have prejudices," said Fowles.

There was a silence which became painful as it grew into minutes. Ruth was facing the fact that her circle shared those prejudices. One might be poor in Amesbury : the widowed daughter of a bishop lived in a cottage at twenty pounds a year, and yet was called on by the county. One might be in a profession : her father had been a solicitor, and Bob was just out of his articles. One might even own a factory : some of the mill-owners had lived in Amesbury for generations and were universally looked up to as "gentry." But there was just one line over which one stepped into outer social darkness from which there was no hope of rescue in this world : that was the dividing line between wholesale and retail trade.

If you belonged to the "tradesman" class, were you read in all philosophies, gifted with the wisdom of the ancients, the lyre of Apollo, the wit of Mercury, the heart of a saint—you were still on the wrong side of the social door.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Isn't it absurd?" said Ruth, and turned to Fowles in indignation.

"But deeply rooted," said Fowles in the quiet voice. "Deeply rooted."

Again they stayed silent, the lilies breathing out their message in the golden light of evening. Everything was hushed; far off across the meadows the cowman called to his herd, and his dog's faint barking sounded like an echo in a dream. The silence of the wood, deep-sunken in the meadows, closed around them; they seemed shut off from the human world without, and yet its power stretched into their sanctuary; and while they were conscious of the calm around them, kept them face to face with human conditions.

"Are you going to accept?" said Ruth.

Fowles waited a moment, and then nodded.

Ruth's heart gave a queer leap when he did so; she was experiencing a throbbing, stifling feeling, as if stepping out, indeed, into deep waters. She herself saw the fitness and utility and power of influence of the work he was to do; but she knew that her people would stop at the shop-front, and if they condescended to look through the window, they would only see . . . some one in a frock-coat!

"It does seem, doesn't it, as if some things

## LOVE AMONGST THE RUINS

are impossible in this world?" said Fowles, in the smooth, toneless voice. "Just one or two things that can't be overcome, and amongst them, social prejudices."

"I shouldn't think it seemed very possible for the waves of the Red Sea to rise and let the Israelites go through," said Ruth, suddenly very clear-sighted. "They didn't disappear; they fell on the Egyptians who didn't believe that God had power over the waters. But the Israelites were through and had turned their back on the sea and were pressing forward. They had conquered, and left it behind them for ever."

"They were still in the wilderness," said Fowles.

"But the manna fell each day, the rock opened and the waters gushed out, and they came into the Promised Land," said Ruth. "If they had obeyed and trusted all the time, they'd have been there much sooner, too."

"Well, I'm obeying," said Fowles, drawing his arms off the gate and digging his hands into his pockets. "You say yourself I'm doing the right thing."

"Yes, I do," said Ruth, with no doubt at all.

"And will you say," said Fowles, staring

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

at the trees with all the doggedness of which he was capable, and that was a good deal—"will you say that a bridge could ever be raised that would bring us together?"

"Of course we shall stay friends," cried Ruth. "Don't be so absurd. Do you think it will make any difference to Martha and Michael, except that they'll like and respect you much better? Or to Mr. and Mrs. Keene? Why, it would be an insult to them to even think of such a thing!"

"And your people?" said Fowles. "Your father and mother?"

"I don't see that they have anything to do with it," said Ruth, glancing up astonished. Then she met Fowles' look, and for ever so long they stood and looked.

"You know what I want. I shan't see you again, so I may as well tell you. I want you to be with me always. There isn't a way out here," said Fowles, very softly. "Not past your people."

"Through them; past them," said Ruth, in a voice that was not hers; and came up to Fowles as simply as a child. There was no question: no question at all. He needed her more than any one else, and she could give all he needed.

## LOVE AMONGST THE RUINS

"I didn't mean to ask; I haven't asked," said Fowles, after he had held her for a long time, safely and surely. "I came down meaning not to take the post if you showed you minded; and then I saw it wasn't you who'd mind, but your family; and I saw they couldn't be influenced; and I knew then that whatever they felt or anybody felt like, I'd have to take it. There was only one way forward, and there was no choice in the matter. When one sees, one has to go on."

"And I'm here," said Ruth. Her eyes were closed; she let him hold her, lifted her face to his; she had come over the bridge and was by his side now, for ever and ever.

"Have the waves risen up?" said Fowles, in a queer, startled manner. "But they're there, Ruth, mountains high, overhead. Waves of prejudice and hate. They may topple down; they will, when people know."

"We have to go straight on," said Ruth. "We have to know they won't come down. I expect the Egyptians thought they'd topple, and they did! But we've got to know they won't, however near and high they seem. We've got to go through on to firm land, and keep on forward until we're in peace."

"I can do it, with you," said Fowles.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"May I really say Ruth? Do you know what you've promised? What coming to me has promised?"

"For ever and ever," said Ruth. "I'm not afraid, now. And when we're through, we shan't remember, except to thank God. Oh, I do thank Him! I was worrying about passing through a tiny little stream, but now the sea is here and the waves have risen, everything is easy."

"I suppose I ought to be ashamed of letting you in for what's in front of us," said Fowles. "Isn't it funny? I'm not a bit. I'm glad, because it has made you strong. It's only fair, isn't it, when you've helped me so much? Hullo! I've got to tear back to my train."

"Aren't you coming to see them?" said Ruth.

"I can't, to-night," said Fowles. "I'm helping nurse my mother. She's in bed; she's really pretty bad. I promised to sit up to-night. I'll write at once to your father. Don't say anything till then, unless you feel it's absolutely necessary. I must go, dearest. I shall have to run all the way. I shall write and say 'thank you' in the train. You know what you've done for me, don't you?"



## LOVE AMONGST THE RUINS

Then Ruth opened the gate that led into the wood, and continued her journey home.

"Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." There was only one meaning to that ; that God was a very present help in time of trouble ; so there was nothing to be afraid of. Not though all the armies of the Egyptians thundered close behind. They were all as nothing : as powerless as the armies of a dream.

So Ruth went forward across the meadow and was greeted by her mother from her basket-chair upon the lawn.

"I was wondering where you'd got to," said Mrs. Spence. "I wanted to see you."

Ruth dropped down on to her knees ; somehow she felt if it was right to tell her news, the way would come, quite clear.

"Your father and Aunt Margaret and I have been having a talk about the Industry," said Mrs. Spence. "We do all feel that Dollie should come home. As Aunt Margaret says, the only way to bring her back is to stop supplies and go up to London herself and fetch her ; at the same time she feels, and we feel too, that the Industry ought not to be allowed to stop. London was the mistake. So we've put our heads together and are going to

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

guarantee the wages through these next months. Aunt Margaret can do with some curtains, and I want chair-backs and other things; so you can keep the girls at those. But if we do this you must agree to stop sending anything to Dollie. She'll have to come home then."

"But how did you know?" said Ruth.

"Oh, we know a good deal more than you think, my dear," said Mrs. Spence. "However, we must hope the Industry will build up again, and you'll get your money back. Your father paid in thirty pounds to your private bank account this morning, so that you've got something. I know you understand that that's for you, and that you won't use it for anything but yourself."

"Oh, mother!" said Ruth, in a rush of penitence and gratitude and love. "You are so good to me! Oh, I do hope—I do hope——"

"My dear," said her mother, "does it never occur to you you're a very good daughter to us?"

"But I'm not," said Ruth. "I give my time to other things."

"I should hope so! We're not bedridden," laughed her mother. "My dear child, both your father and I are really very glad you've

## LOVE AMONGST THE RUINS

got a definite interest in your life like the Industry. I do believe in girls doing something; otherwise they get their heads full of nonsense, which causes much more trouble to their family. Of course, I hope you'll marry some day, but I know we shall never have any worry of that sort through you. As I say to your father, we have reason to be thankful that our girls are sensible and busy. I do think the worst troubles that can come to one through one's children, are these foolish love affairs that some girls have!"

"Yes," said Ruth almost inaudibly.

"However, we haven't got to meet that with you," said Mrs. Spence, changing her knitting needle. "Now I shouldn't be at all surprised if some day Margaret doesn't have trouble of that sort with Dollie!"

Something said to Ruth, "Tell now," but she couldn't hurt her mother just when she had been so kind. Later, she would have to . . . later . . . when Fowles had written, thought she, trying with all her heart not to be afraid!

## CHAPTER IX

### THE RED SEA

"IT is out of the question," said Mr. Spence. "So out of the question that I see no use in an interview which could only be painful for both of us. Nothing that Mr. Fowles could say would make his position any different. I am sorry for the fellow; but he is comparatively young, and many people go through this sort of thing and forget all about it in a short time. It isn't as if you'd seen anything of each other. How many times did you meet?"

"Four," said Ruth.

"I thought as much. Absurd! Absurd! Why, he knows nothing of you—absolutely nothing. The whole affair has been a flash in the pan, and a rather unseemly one. I can't understand how the fellow has had the cheek to write to me."

"I wanted you to know," murmured Ruth. She sat in her father's study; the clink of china came faintly through the wall, showing

## THE RED SEA

the breakfast things were being cleared away. The morning sun shone pleasantly upon the lawn. The gardener was bringing the mowing machine across the walk. On all sides the day's work was proceeding with regularity. Only in the study had the bomb exploded which darkened the sunshine and set a multitude of currents whirling and conflicting in the minds of the two who faced each other.

"Of course," said Mr. Spence. "I should think so. I don't expect to be kept in the dark on such matters. You have never had any reason to withhold your confidence from us; at least, I hope not. We have always tried to do our best to make you happy, and I think we have succeeded."

"Oh yes," said Ruth. Her white print frock crackled a little when she moved; the skirt stuck out in pretty stiffness. Her eyes were wide open and had a dazed look, as if she scarcely knew what she was saying. The finality of the decision had left her inarticulate. Her opinion had not been asked for; indeed, it did not seem to have entered her father's head that she possessed one.

"Yet I am puzzled at such a proposition being made on such short acquaintance," said Mr. Spence, picking up the letter. "It

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

is not as though you were a girl who encouraged advances. The most striking thing about you is your reserve; if I may use an old-fashioned expression, I might say your modesty. One would have thought the densest nature would have recognised it. It really seems very singular that you should have met such a person in Michael's home."

"Mr. Fowles is his greatest friend," said Ruth. "They have known each other for fifteen years. He stays with Mr. and Mrs. Keene. I don't think you have quite the right idea of him, father, dear."

"Possibly not; I merely judge from the evidence that is presented to me; and if I may say so, I think I have always been considered capable of giving a sound decision. Possibly I may be more experienced than you; of course that is a matter of opinion." Mr. Spence glanced over the letter once more with an air of strict impartiality. "I do not think I am prejudiced, though, in saying this offer from a man in his position is a piece of impudence."

"Father, dear, they've only just lost all their money," faltered Ruth.

"I really do not see that that improves matters," returned Mr. Spence. "Men with

## THE RED SEA

a sense of delicacy draw back at such a time from the prospect of entangling a girl's future."

"But it's now he feels that he needs help," breathed Ruth.

"Needs help!" said Mr. Spence, and almost smacked the letter on the table. "And does he think that I am going to give it him?"

"Oh no," cried Ruth, flushing to the roots of her hair. "He isn't asking you; he would almost die if he knew you'd thought that. I meant, he needed—needed——" Ruth could not continue. The ordeal she was facing was worse than anything she had anticipated.

"Needed sympathy; and because you're taken in by every one you think you ought to give it," said her father. "I'm sorry to be drastic, Ruth, but it's my duty to protect you. The fact of such a letter coming shows that you have no power of doing that for yourself. What do you know about this young man? Tell me!"

Mr. Spence leant back in his chair in an attitude of immense patience; in what he indeed felt was unusually broad-minded toleration. His gentle Ruth had been foolish, but he wanted her to see her folly with her

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

own eyes. That such a shrinking, unsophisticated girl could estimate a young man's character correctly, was out of the question. He was astonished that she had not recognised this at once.

"We have had some long talks," said Ruth. "And I've heard a lot about him from Martha and Michael. I wish you'd see Michael. He'd tell you how mistaken your idea is."

"Thank you, my dear; I am capable of forming my judgment without Michael's help," said Mr. Spence. "You have had some long talks. How, and where?"

Ruth was silent; she had awakened to the knowledge that her father had made up his mind.

"I am ready to hear everything you have to tell me," said her father. "Everything." He brought his finger-tips together and waited. There was no response to the invitation.

Ruth's eyes were almost closed; there seemed no possible human help. She sat still therefore and waited in her turn.

"I can see the difficult position in which you have been placed," her father continued in a rather milder voice. "When a man is down on his luck a kind-hearted girl generally



## THE RED SEA

wants to stand by him, and very commendably in some cases. But you see, my dear, this case is not one that admits of any redress of the unfortunate situation. He has deliberately thrown away his social status."

"I'm on the same level," said Ruth, speaking in the voice that did not sound like hers.

"How do you mean?" said her father, shocked into sharpness.

"I sell things," said Ruth. "So does Dollie."

"Yes, and have I ever approved of the proceedings?" asked her father. "Haven't I always said your mistaken zeal had led you into degradation?"

"There would be no degradation in marrying Mr. Fowles," said poor Ruth, finding she had to inform her father that the project was not undesirable. "I think he is behaving nobly."

"In becoming a shop-walker," snapped Mr. Spence. "Such sentimentality is absurd."

"Father, dear, so is your point of view," said Ruth, in a burst of courage, and with a rustle of starched skirts she rose as swiftly as a bird and stood with one knee resting on the chair and both hands on the back, confronting her father, rather quakingly, but with determination. "Lots of well-bred

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

people are in trade now," said Ruth; "and more and more and more are going to be! Mr. Fowles was offered this position because he is noted for his knowledge and his taste. I told you all about his curios. He is more cultured than any man I've met. To live with him would be a constant education; and I am proud that he feels I am worthy of his companionship. If you knew him you would understand."

Ruth had tipped her chin up ever so little; it gave her a slight resemblance, however, to Martha. Mr. Spence had a momentary vision of interviews with his other daughter in her youthful, unregenerate days. But they were used to Martha having a will of her own; that Ruth should show signs of possessing one, was impossible to believe. The growing realisation that she had, was most unpleasant.

"You are behaving very ungratefully," said Mr. Spence in a low, tense voice; he felt as if he were being defrauded of Ruth's obedience. He never expected much from Martha; but on Ruth both parents counted. "Very ungratefully," he repeated; and paused so that the remark could sink in. He disliked hurting her, but she must be brought to see what she was doing.

## THE RED SEA

"Why ungratefully?" said Ruth, with a sudden catch of her breath and foolish, sinking feeling.

Her father saw the signs of weakening. Ruth was not hardened yet. Martha had always made it clear she would get her own way; but he could not believe that Ruth would hold out.

"After all that we have done for you," said he, appealing to the Ruth he knew. "Your mother and I are not young now; you are the only child left to us. We surely are not asking too much if we expect some small consideration in a matter which involves us so closely. You cannot act as an independent agent in this matter. Our reputation would be irretrievably dragged down. And all for a perfect stranger whom you have met four times. Is all that we have done for you to go for nothing, Ruth?" Mr. Spence had sunk his voice still lower; he shaded his eyes with his hand. Ruth's persistence in a step he disapproved of wounded him to the heart. A word from him should be a law of love to her. He had always delighted in her obedience, because he knew it sprang from her affection as well as her respect.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

The fact of Fowles' position did not strike at Mr. Spence with anything like the sting of Ruth's rebellion. He had decided at once, directly he read Fowles' letter, that the offer was not suitable; and he was not in the habit of rescinding his decisions when they had been announced. The news of the comparative slightness of the acquaintance had confirmed him in his view, and had also, quite unconsciously, considerably heightened the jealousy which never lurks very far from an autocrat's family affection.

So he displayed that affection, feeling it should bring Ruth to her tearful senses instantly.

"I can't see that marrying Mr. Fowles will drag the family down," Ruth answered. "You haven't met him. You have a wrong picture of him, father, dear. I'm sure you would like him if you met. You know what a high standard Mr. and Mrs. Keene have; they like him. They have him to stay. Oh, wouldn't you see them about him?"

Ruth was speaking logically, earnestly, even with enthusiasm. Not by so much as a quiver of an eyelash had she responded to the picture of an abandoned nest.

"As I told you before, I am not in the

## THE RED SEA

habit of taking strangers into my confidence on family matters," said Mr. Spence. "The family to me is sacred. I am sorry all that we have done for you and Martha has not built up a better idea of home relations. Still, I am not the first father who has seen his daughters turn from him."

The analogy of King Lear was irresistible.

"Sharper than a serpent's tooth!" said he. "I only hope you'll never be in the position where you have put me to-day."

And then Ruth woke up to the enormity of her disobedience.

"Father," she gasped. "Father, dear!"

"Enough has been said," said Mr. Spence, seeing victory in front and availing himself of his advantage with a master's hand. "I don't want to hear any more about it. I confess you've hurt me bitterly. If there was one thing in the world I counted on it was your love."

"But you have it, father," cried Ruth. "Because I care for some one else——"

"Of whom you know absolutely nothing," thundered Mr. Spence.

"I know something," said Ruth, with a simplicity that strengthened the remark. "I can't explain, father, dear, but I know what

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

sort of a man Mr. Fowles is, and I know we can help each other."

"He's hypnotised you," said Mr. Spence in a burst of inspiration. "Men of his kind do have a mesmeric influence on inexperienced women. You aren't accountable for what you're saying."

Ruth bent her head; her lip trembled. It seemed impossible to hope for reason or justice from her father in his present state of mind.

"Simply hypnotised!" repeated Mr. Spence, calmed in some measure by the new idea. "I mustn't hold you responsible; I will only ask for your promise that you will not write or see this young man again. That is a reasonable condition to ask from a member of what is, after all, my household. If you wish to dis sever yourself entirely from us, you will then, of course, be at liberty to consider yourself a free agent."

"I must have time to think," said Ruth, very pale, but no longer trembling. "You see, father, don't you, that I can't decide in a moment?"

"Do you mean to say there's any hesitation in your mind?" said Mr. Spence, confronted with a consequence he had never entertained

## THE RED SEA

seriously for a single moment. "Ruth, my dear, wake up! you are contemplating leaving us: cutting yourself off from us! You couldn't. You are not in your right senses."

"I don't want to cut myself off," Ruth answered, still pale and wide-eyed, but holding to her position with baffling sincerity. "But I can't promise not to see or write to Mr. Fowles, until I've—thought. I can't see clearly; I must be quiet for a little."

"Very well, then," said her father, getting up from his chair and snapping down his desk-top. "If you do decide to defy me, you must understand that I shall answer this young man's impudence in a way that will leave him no shadow of excuse for repeating his request if he has a shred of self-respect, which I doubt; I very much doubt. That is the last duty I can perform to you; but it shall be performed thoroughly. After my reply, he will not be blind to how your people view his proposition or himself. He shall have it in plain words."

"But if he has changed?" said Ruth. "Father, dear, he was at one time what you mightn't like; what I shouldn't like. But there was always so much good in him, and it's showing now. He's making such a splen-

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

did struggle to do right. Won't you give him a chance of proving that he has altered ? I know ; I really know."

"You !" said Mr. Spence, and in his tone there was so much sadness that his contempt of Ruth's judgment scarcely hurt her at all. But all the same, she was absolutely certain that Fowles was in earnest. He might have acted on too swift an impulse in writing to her father ; or even, in speaking. But then, that confession had come about through force of circumstances, when it seemed as if they were being irrevocably separated. And Ruth would have hated to have had to keep such a secret. Looking back, she could not see how things could have been different.

But it was no use telling her father that she did read people far better than he knew, even though she always tried to think the very best of them, and never voiced the faults that were sometimes quite plain. If it had been anything less vital, she might have yielded to the immense love she had for her father ; in a way, she understood now just what he was feeling. She could hardly have expected him to think anything else. Fowles' record was not the steady, solid one which a father might very reasonably desire. The poor little



## THE RED SEA

home which was all he had to offer seemed pitiful in comparison with the home in which Ruth lived ; the conditions of the new life were, from a material standpoint, uninviting, even humiliating. And yet to Ruth a thousand times more preferable was the prospect of struggle and endurance with the man who was doing his best to conquer the old self and gain firm ground, than her present comfortable existence.

Her one thought now was to take the wisest step under the present circumstances.

"Supposing I waited for a time," said Ruth at last. "Say, for a year? I am quite sure now ; but that would give him the opportunity to prove he was in earnest. I don't mean about me : I mean, about his life. If you found then that he was worthy, father, dear—that he was a man of whom you approved——" her voice sank falteringly.

"I could not say I would give my consent then," said Mr. Spence. "But possibly I would be willing to reconsider the question. Only you must not write or allow him to come here."

"I should like to think it over," said Ruth, very pale.

"If you promise I shall say we cannot

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

consider his proposal in the present unsettled state of his affairs," said Mr. Spence. "I would meet you as far as that."

"I see," said Ruth. If she refused, her father would write a letter to Fowles that would force him, for pride's sake, to draw back. He was finding his situation difficult and disagreeable; if it were presented to him as Mr. Spence saw it, how would he feel?

"I'd like to go and think," said Ruth in a faltering voice, and made her way out of the study, while her father became busy amongst the papers on the desk-top.

She closed the door and stood for a moment looking across the hall in an unseeing way. A housemaid was descending, and Ruth watched her passing along the gallery until she reappeared on the staircase which led to where Ruth stood. Then the drawing-room door opened and Mrs. Spence came out.

"Oh, is that you, Ruth?" said she. "We want some flowers. I wish you'd pick me some. And do you mind telling Roberts that the hydrangeas are looking rather droopy. He has some ramblers. He might send some in. You're not doing anything, are you?"

"No," said Ruth mechanically, and went into the inner hall and found a basket and

## THE RED SEA

scissors and her garden hat. Everything was going on as usual ; here she was on the hard-rolled walk, with the lawn stretching away in the sunshine, and the smell of new-cut grass, and the whirring of the mower, and all the familiar scents and sounds of the garden on a bright June morning.

Could she be seriously contemplating the possibility of leaving it all ? Ruth's eyes were as puzzled as those of a child who is suddenly awakened in the middle of the night and told he must get up.

And yet, the possibility of leaving her home would have to be faced in any case.

"In whatever way I go, I shall have to go," thought Ruth, bending over the sweet peas. "I am a free agent, too ; I always am free to do right ; and no one can suffer if the right thing is done. The point is to know what is right."

Blue and purple and ice-white, the flowers tumbled on to the pink and rose that she had gathered. The scent came up refreshingly. "Father and mother have each other ; mother has Aunt Margaret close to, and heaps of friends. They didn't miss Martha long ; her place soon closed up ; they have so many interests," thought Ruth, trying to see the

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

claims of the conflicting parties. "But he is going to a strange place, where he'll be out of touch with his old friends ; and his mother mayn't make his home happy. Oh, he needs some one to whom none of the conditions that he minds are important. He needs some one who can make a home for him ; then he can live in his home and his business. Father and mother have a home : just the sort of home that's right for them ; but he hasn't ; and I could help him to have it," thought Ruth, and bright drops glittered on the flower petals.

"I'd leave home, anyway, if I went to some one they approved of," she murmured. "But if I don't stand by him, he'll be alone."

She straightened up and turned. The waves must rise as high as was ordained ; they had promised each other to keep straight on. They would be protected if they did so ; for the waves that threatened now were not God-sent. Fowles had not been given a fair hearing. Prejudice had reared up like a barrier ; and behind it Mr. Spence had judged and condemned and passed sentence, refusing to call witnesses or hark to evidence. He had not been fair. But if they waited a year, he had promised at least to reconsider the position. They could prove they were in

## THE RED SEA

earnest by complying with his condition. And Fowles must work out his problem by himself. Though she yearned to be with him, Ruth felt in her heart that she could not carry his burden for him. He would gain immeasurably in strength for being left to fight it out alone.

Ruth saw no farther than the immediate step ; possibly the year might be shortened ; if not, at the end her father might be won round ; she could show her love and her obedience now. After that, she must think of Fowles alone.

As she carried the flowers back to the house she saw her father come out and turn towards the rose garden ; she crossed the path that intersected an intervening border and overtook him somewhat breathlessly.

"I've decided," said Ruth.

"Well ?" said Mr. Spence, with the judicial air that blinded him as much as others to the motives of his deeds.

"I'll wait for a year," said Ruth. "I won't write, and he shan't come here. I can't promise not to see him, for one never can say where one may be ; and he knows Martha and the Keenes. But there shall be no arranged meeting."

"I don't wish to be unreasonable," said

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

Mr. Spence ; his anger had simmered down a little ; the sweetness of the sunshine, the brilliant freshness of leaf and bud and flower had a somewhat softening tendency. Ruth's crushed demeanour went to his heart.

"I don't want to be severe," Mr. Spence repeated. "I can quite understand your sympathy under the circumstances. In fact, it is often painful for those who have a wider knowledge of the world to have to curb the generous impulses of ignorance. I am sure you will see the wisdom ; and as I can see you have reflected already to some purpose, I am willing to trust to your good sense for an ultimate decision. If you will agree to take no further step without consulting me, I will merely write to say under the present circumstances of his unsettled position I feel discussions of your relations would be premature."

"Oh, thank you, father," said Ruth, relieved from the overwhelming pressure that had threatened ; and incontinently dropped her basket and put her hands upon her father's shoulders and hid her face against him. She did love him so much ; and it had been dreadful to be standing far away, as if she were a stranger.

"My dear child, I didn't want to hurt you," said Mr. Spence, drawing her to him with all

## THE RED SEA

the old tenderness. "Don't let's think of it again. Come and see the roses."

"I must take these into mother first," said Ruth.

Mrs. Spence was in the low, cool drawing-room, still busy with her plants. She glanced up anxiously, and Ruth saw that she had heard the story of the interview.

"I've seen your father," said Mrs. Spence. "It's really very difficult. I can't think what Martha was doing; she must have seen."

"I've just been with father again," said Ruth, "and he's decided it is best not to speak of it for a time. And, mother, dear, Martha doesn't know. I don't think there's any need to tell her."

"I certainly don't want to talk about it," said Mrs. Spence. "Though such things always get about. You must have given him some encouragement for him to have written at such a time."

Mrs. Spence was severer than her husband. She had shared with him the peaceful certainty that Ruth's mind was as a crystal pool to them. The evidence of a startlingly independent line of thought came as a treachery; never would they have suspected Ruth of a word or action that could not have been exposed to the whole of Amesbury.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

She had never received a letter in her life that they had not read ; had never known a person whom they did not know. And now the fleeting nature of human property was being shown, and Mrs. Spence felt they were being defrauded as much by Ruth herself as by this unknown Mr. Fowles. If Ruth maintained her old submissiveness, the interloper could be chased away ; Ruth's encouragement alone made him dangerous.

The parental soreness was, however, concealed by fears for Ruth's future ; while Mrs. Spence was conscious of a certain tingling sensation and the feeling that Ruth had been deceitful, both she and Mr. Spence were actuated by a very real desire for their daughter's welfare.

She received the news of the truce without elation, therefore, and returned to clipping and tending of the plants with the sense of injury undiminished. Had they not given in to every wish that Ruth had ever entertained ? The Industry was a case in point. They had helped her against all their private prejudice, and even judgment.

The waves indeed ran high. Ruth felt she must summon all her faith and all her courage to her aid, if she were to go forward unafraid and trusting in complete deliverance.



## CHAPTER X

### WILL-POWER

“**I**T will come by the nine o’clock post ; my mother always writes her letters in the morning, when they’re on business. I know I shall get the cheque to-night,” said Dollie, casting about for further reasons to convince the woman who stood opposite. Dollie had no pride now ; sensitiveness would place her at the mercy of her creditors. Already Dollie’s visage had assumed the set lines of the habitual fighter. It pleased her to see herself as Napoleon, ploughing through and over every obstacle with a face of flint and heart of stone.

She had smiled cynically when Ruth wrote to say she could send no more money. The suggestion that Dollie should write home and tell the truth was received with the comment : “Panic !” Ruth had fallen ; a poor recreant. Now Dollie stood alone, facing the great city

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

which she had sworn to conquer, and *would* conquer even yet!

The drama of self-sufficient isolation buoyed Dollie as she trudged from shop to shop that morning; a short but succinct interview with her landlady brought down the flag with appalling rapidity at half-past three that afternoon; and Dollie was forced to pen a terse letter, containing a greater proportion of truth than had been allowed to escape in all her previous home correspondence. Dollie had been reduced to a plain exposition of the situation at the moment.

Thereupon Dollie had announced the arrival of her cheque as certain, and had to find an excuse each time the postman knocked during the last two days. The landlady was listening to the fourth explanation Dollie had made that day.

"Well, I said I couldn't let you have these rooms another night if I don't see my money, and I still say it," said the landlady. "If it don't come by the nine o'clock post, you go. It's not my fault you weren't out this afternoon. I've had some experience of lodgers, and I know what they're like to get rid of. I ought to have had you out weeks ago."

"You don't seem to realise that as long as

## WILL-POWER

I'm here, you've got me as security," said Dollie, sinking her voice to what she felt to be a practical and yet a winning note.

"And a lot of good you do me!" said the landlady, with sardonic scorn. "Using my gas and wearing out my carpet and blocking up my rooms so that no respectable person could look over them! Such a mess as you've made here I never see!"

"I tell you I did not wish to write to my people; but now I've done it," said Dollie. "You certainly won't get a penny if you turn me out at such an hour of night. My family would be furious."

"Ho, would they!" cried the landlady. "Your family, indeed! I've heard enough of that family in my time. When I see their money I'll believe in them. Yes, and in you! Talking as though I were dirt and you a duchess, and owing five weeks, to say nothing of the milk."

"I tell you, everything will be paid—everything," said Dollie. "My people are well off. That little bill is nothing to them."

"Ho, isn't it?" scoffed the landlady. "That being so, you might ask this friend of your grand family you're going to meet to lend the money. Posts are *so* uncertain."

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

Dollie heard the quotation from the morning conversation with heightened colour; and edged nearer to the door. The interview was becoming inconveniently prolonged. If she were kept much longer, the friend might grow tired of waiting.

"I might do that," said she conciliatingly, "if you are in earnest about turning me out. At any rate, you shall have the money somehow."

Dollie slipped adroitly through the door and descended with rapidity and a rather exhilarating sensation, as of a captive making a dash for liberty.

Yet as she hurried along towards Sloane Square the liberty presented a curtailed appearance. If the cheque did not arrive at nine and she was refused admittance, even her resourcefulness could not see a pleasant ending.

"I shall have to walk about all night," thought Dollie. "I've no money for a hotel, or even my train fare unless I borrow something from Mr. Fowles; and I can't do that now he's lost all his money. I expect the dinner will be as much as he can possibly afford."

Dollie had come in sight of the restaurant

## WILL-POWER

where they were to meet ; no one was standing there, and her heart sank. If he had gone ! Actual hunger made the contingency terrible, apart from her real desire to be with some one who would soothe her pride and help her to regain confidence.

A casual glance, as she strolled past the door, discovered Fowles at a table, and she made her way inside with relief.

"I'm sorry," said Dollie. "I was kept on an important business matter that it was impossible to leave. I always put business before everything."

Dollie sat down and handled her gloves in a masterly way : the finger-tips were ingeniously mended with a strip she had cut out from the bottom. Gloves were a serious problem.

"You're a very conscientious person," said Fowles, with a sigh of envy. Dollie seemed to him like an automatic machine that never could get out of gear.

"One must be conscientious in business if one is to be successful," said Dollie, voicing more truth than she knew. "It's impossible to succeed if one puts anything before one's duty."

"I know," said Fowles, and then they both

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

sat silent waiting for the first course. Fowles was preoccupied with thoughts of the difficulties duty brought to him, and Dollie could think of nothing but her craving for the meal. She knew what it was to be hungry: not healthily hungry, but faintingly, starvingly so. Dollie's will-power was exerted on her bodily requirements, but the need of discipline relaxed, she abandoned herself to satisfying hunger with a zest that was nothing more nor less than greed.

When the food came they still ate in silence. Fowles lingered as long as he could, so that Dollie could have enough; he was sorry for her, and yet a little shocked, æsthetically, to see such appetite.

When dinner was over they rose. Dollie had not so much to say about the business as usual, and they had no other subject of conversation. Fowles proposed a walk across the Park, for it was still early and the evening was warm. Presently, therefore, they turned into the Green Park. The season was a very gay one, and carriages and motors rolled past in an unceasing stream. A faint chrysophase glow lingered in the sky, and clouds spread out like wing-feathers. The beautiful evening harmonised with the ease and abundance

## WILL-POWER

whose evidences were all around them. One after another noiseless electric broughams passed, within whose dark recesses diamonds gleamed, and silks and satins shimmered, suggesting infinite luxury. It was not as if one passed, but hundreds and hundreds, and those represented only the tiniest fraction of wealthy citizens.

"Oh, the money's there!" burst from Dollie uncontrollably. "If only we could get to it. There must be a way of getting through; there must be!"

"I suppose work brings you through," said Fowles, who was not intoxicated by the sight, because he had been one of the stream, and was tired of the ebb and flow.

"But it doesn't. That's the awful part," said Dollie, and Fowles pulled himself out of his meditations with an effort.

"Oh, it does, if you go on long enough," said he, feeling he was speaking platitudes, but that nothing else could be forthcoming in talk with his companion.

"Supposing you are stopped from going on?" said Dollie, in a tense voice that aroused a glance. "Supposing a barrier comes down upon your path and there's no way through: not a chink?"

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"But there's always a way through," said Fowles. "You should talk to your cousin."

"Ruth!" said Dollie, and lifted up her face and laughed. She had seen an actress do this once, and had remembered the action as wonderfully brave and bitter. "Talk to Ruth! Poor Ruth! one mustn't be hard on her; some people are born weak, and one has to bear with them."

"I don't think Miss Spence is weak," said Fowles, very, very quietly.

"Oh no, you mightn't, to talk to her," said Dollie, ignorant that Fowles' acquaintance with her cousin partook of anything but a superficial nature, and viewing his ignorance with the indifferent pity she bestowed on all people who entertained opinions differing from her own. "Ruth talks impressively. Even I was taken in at one time by the way she talks. I don't mean that I ever expected anything heroic or brave from her: I knew she hadn't much character; but still, in her way, I did think she could be relied on: possibly because she isn't inspiring. Those dead-level, spiritless natures are usually dependable."

"I haven't that impression of Miss Spence," said Fowles, who was certainly not unin-



## WILL-POWER

terested now. "In fact, I find her the most inspiring person I have ever met."

"I suppose you've come in for one of her talks," said Dollie, with a little wrinkling of her features. "I may as well tell you that, just at this moment, I have reason to be definite about Ruth's strength. I suppose she'd say she was leaving me to God! That's the way that sort of person lets you drop without a twinge of conscience."

"I should think you'd be a rather tiring load for Miss Spence," said Fowles, in a neat, gentle voice which emitted each syllable with extreme distinctness.

"What do you mean?" flashed Dollie.

"You said she had let you drop; I gathered you felt she ought to continue carrying you," said Fowles.

"We're partners," said Dollie. "Do you approve of people entering into obligations on the understanding each is going to support the other, and then for one to back out directly the position became difficult?"

Fowles did not answer. Dollie's words had struck with unpleasant appositeness. The short note he had received from Mr. Spence a fortnight since darted irresistibly to mind. He had accepted the decision for the moment;

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

there had been an immense amount of business on his shoulders these last days. The clearing up of his father's affairs, his mother's convalescence, the disposal of his own things, and the arrangements for his new life and duties presented an overwhelming amount of material for thought; and he felt Mr. Spence's decision to be all that could be expected in the immediate circumstances.

But Dollie's remarks were disquietingly to the point, even though he fought against accepting them as truth.

"One can't give an opinion on a matter till one knows all the circumstances," said he.

"You can hear them," replied Dollie, too engrossed now in self-pity to realise that she was entering on an accusation of her cousin. "You know I came up to London to sell the work she does at Amesbury. Perhaps you don't know that I've practically starved and had no pleasure, and worked like a slave day and night to keep the expenses down. I haven't thought of myself as a human person, only as an instrument of help for Ruth. And now, after all these months of toil and self-sacrifice, just at the very moment when the season is here and the time for reaping the result has come, Ruth refuses to send money ;

## WILL-POWER

simply orders me to give up everything and come home, because she thinks I ought to live with my mother. There's no reason. My mother hasn't the faintest desire for me to come back. But in a moment of sentiment Ruth has seen some text about duty to parents, and so has sent word the show-room's to be closed and everything I've done is to be wasted. Now, do you call her weak ? ”

“ No. Tyrannical ! ” said Fowles. “ Why should you obey her ? She doesn't control your actions ? ”

“ No, indeed ! But she's trying to,” said Dollie.

“ I thought you said she'd dropped you,” said Fowles, still hunting for light on the confusion.

“ She's refused to send me money,” said Dollie shortly. “ A business can't be carried on for nothing.”

“ Has she got it ? ” asked Fowles.

“ She could get it,” said Dollie. “ I'm talking of money for the business, not money for myself. Ruth has always been the manager, so I can't handle capital without her consent. Besides, I shouldn't like to. I believe in being loyal to one's partner. I could get capital now if I liked to move without Ruth's

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

consent, but I won't do that." Dollie spoke with a virtuous air that almost convinced herself. She could not exactly have said where the capital she talked about existed, but the emphasis with which she voiced the statement lost nothing by that fact.

"No, of course not," said Fowles. "But possibly Miss Spence doesn't feel it wise for you to stay on here: she was rather worried when she came up months ago."

"She's always worrying," said Dollie. "From the beginning I've had to work against a dead weight of opposition. You don't know what I've had to fight!"

"I thought she was the manager," said Fowles.

"Only nominally," said Dollie loftily. "I run the whole thing in reality. Always have done. Ruth counts for nothing. As I said, she has no spirit, no initiative, no force of character. Oh no! I've always had to make my way alone."

"Then why don't you now?" asked Fowles.

"Because of loyalty," said Dollie glibly. "I tell you, *I'm* loyal to the principles of partnership."

"But you just said you've always worked

## WILL-POWER

against Miss Spence from the beginning," said Fowles.

"I said I've always had to work against the dead-weight of her character. She's always seen that what I wanted was right, and has been glad for me to do it even if she hadn't the power or courage to do it herself," said Dollie, almost believing all she said. "I don't want to blame Ruth, for it isn't her fault: I know it isn't, even now. You see, she's governed by her people, and they are so old-fashioned, Ruth can't take a step unless they approve, and they never approve of anything."

"They must be rather advanced to approve of your showroom," said Fowles.

"But they don't!" cried Dollie. They hate the Industry, especially my uncle; he always has done."

"Then how has Miss Spence carried it on?" asked Fowles.

"She felt it was right," said Dollie. "She was keen on training the girls in her Bible-class, and helping them to earn their living happily. Then when I thought of the co-operative idea Ruth saw that was right; so with my help she held out for once against her father's prejudices. But now I've gone

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

she has no one to inspire or strengthen her, and she has succumbed to the family opposition, and thinks I must give in too. They're in possession of her, in short. That sort of character is always ruled by the nearest influence. That's where one gets so misled. When Ruth is with you she seems as if you could do anything you liked with her; then she goes home and the next thing you have is a complete withdrawal in the name of duty. That's what maddens me."

They had stopped beside a seat, and Dollie slid down on to it, tired out. Tears were not far away. The emotion that she had been working up was not of a reposeful character. Added to which, Fowles had not been as sympathetic as she had expected him to be. Dollie had not thought much about the significance of his attention, simply because appreciation seemed her right. She accepted Fowles' devotion as one more tribute to her compelling and unusual character.

Fowles had not yet told her of his imminent departure, for Dollie's preoccupation with her own concerns did not invite confidences.

There comes a time, however, when the most self-sufficient person feels the need of sympathy; and as Dollie was alienated from

## WILL-POWER

Ruth, and indeed all Amesbury people, she turned to the one friend whom she possessed outside that radius.

When Fowles sought to change the conversation with the news that this would be their last meeting for some time to come, Dollie experienced a shock. She was indeed deserted on every side.

"Going away?" she repeated. "Going to leave London? Why?"

"I've got to earn my living now," said Fowles.

"But why leave London then?" asked Dollie. "The one place where everybody wants to get to!"

"People make livings outside it," answered Fowles. "You attach too great importance to London. One can build up a business or position or income in the provinces, and in far less strenuous conditions. I'm not sorry to leave London now, though I suppose once I should have felt like being drained of my life's blood if I'd had to settle down in a country town. But I'm getting to the age where one sees things in proportion."

"Oh, but you're too young to stagnate!" cried Dollie desperately.

"I assure you I'm not going to," said

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

Fowles. "My work will take me all over the country. I'm going to buy old furniture for a firm of decorators and upholsterers; new stuff, too; and fabrics and such things. I suppose I shall handle the selling also, in some measure."

"You couldn't stock our work?" said Dollie, in a breath of inspiration. "Oh, couldn't you? I'd let you have all I've got up here, sale or return, at any discount, if you could pay down ten pounds in advance. Only ten!"

"That's not business," said Fowles.

"Yes it is," said Dollie. "It's speculation. I've got to stay up here. If I could say I'd sold all the stock and they could see it gone and I had something with which to pay my bills, Ruth would come round; or if she wouldn't, I could get mother to advance some capital. Oh, do help me as a friend. You'll be sure to sell ten pounds' worth."

"Your stock must have cost more than that," said Fowles.

"Yes; but you shall have the rest of it, sale or return. It's a wonderful chance for you," said Dollie.

"I might stock the work," said Fowles thoughtfully. "At least I could bring it to



## WILL-POWER

the notice of the firm. But if I were you I'd be careful how you make your propositions: you're speaking as if you were a bankrupt firm?"

"So I am," said Dollie, powerless to resist the dramatic appeal of her situation. "At nine o'clock to-night I may be homeless. I am prepared to walk about all night."

"Are you crazy?" said Fowles.

"No," said Dollie. "But I've almost come to the end of all that even I can do. You see, I've been deserted. If I can't pay seven pounds to-night my landlady refuses me admittance."

"And do you mean to say your people know?" said Fowles, staring at her in amazement.

Dollie hesitated for a second, but tragedy had got the master hand, and she nodded.

"Yes," said she; "they know. But I suppose they think I always have looked after myself and will do so now. I told you I've always had to stand alone. I must go on doing so, that's all. But you are the only person who's been kind to me, and now that you're going I admit I feel solitary."

"I simply cannot believe it," said Fowles, addressing himself to the protective darkness.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

The picture Dollie had presented was impossible to reconcile with all he knew of Ruth. She could not have behaved with such inhumanity.

Yet here was Dollie, unmistakably starved, exhausted and alone.

"I don't know what to think," Fowles murmured.

"Don't you believe me?" cried Dollie, and then fell to whimpering in an hysterical way that made Fowles shiver.

"Yes, yes," said he. "Oh, do try and control yourself."

"You don't know what my landlady said to me," sobbed Dollie. "Oh, I can't go back and face her. I c-c-can't."

"Of course I shall lend you the money," said Fowles in an exasperated voice that helped Dollie to regain her self-possession.

"In exchange for the stock. I shall see you have security," said she, scrubbing her eyes. "I don't know what I'm doing, breaking down like this. Only there's not a soul to care what I do or what becomes of me, and just occasionally I feel lonely."

Fowles felt a twinge of compunction. Dollie's version of her wrongs, implying as it did censure of Ruth, had alienated her from

## WILL-POWER

his sympathy ; the sight of her, thin, forlorn and desperate, however, touched him, and he spoke comfortingly.

" I'll write out a cheque," said he. " Fortunately I have my book. Have you a pen ? "

Dollie produced one, and the precious slip of paper changed hands. She gripped it rather convulsively. Now that the tension was released she felt like a clock whose main-spring was suddenly running down.

" I'd like to go home," said Dollie. " I feel rather faint."

They walked across the Park in silence ; Thimble Street had never looked more dark or dreary.

" I can't ask you to come in," said Dollie, pausing before they reached the step. " But to-morrow morning please come round and select your security, and I'll sign a receipt for this. I don't believe I said thank you. You understand I must have the transaction on an absolutely business basis ; it is a question of honour."

Fowles departed, wondering if his usual insight into character had failed. Dollie's words were so confusingly opposed to all the evidence of her deeds ; but then, so she said, were Ruth's.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

Would Ruth fail him? Would the opposition of her people be too strong for her? Would she draw back? He was shaken; he could not help admitting he was shaken. Why had she not written? She must know what her father had answered. Why had she not sent him her assurance that she was undisturbed? He decided he would write and make sure; and then pride began its ugly arguments. By the time he reached the studio he had decided if she wanted to hear of him she would write. He would wait as a test.

Meanwhile Dollie had let herself in and mounted to her room, strung up for victorious encounter. The light was on in her room, and she paused before opening the door. She felt sick and shaky. The ordeal must be gone through, however, and she pushed in, prepared for the sight of her box being investigated.

"Mother!" said Dollie.

Mrs. Harvey was waiting for her; she rose with a little cry.

"Oh, my dear," said she, "why didn't you let us know before? The woman's been telling me. You must come home at once. I felt the only way was to come myself and fetch you."

## WILL-POWER

Dollie made a trembling step and knew no more. The spring had run down altogether.

When she opened her eyes again she was in bed and her mother was bending over her. Some one was moving in the other room.

"The rent," said Dollie.

"It's all right, dear," said her mother.

"I want my little bag," said Dollie faintly, and whimpered the request till it was brought. She felt within and found the cheque was safe. She put the bag under her pillow; there was no need to tell of the business transaction she had just effected. She would arrange to transfer the stock, of course. Mr. Fowles should not lose anything.

Dollie fell into a fevered tossing which passed into an unconsciousness which lasted for many days.

## CHAPTER XI

### A SHOPPING EXPEDITION

“**W**HY not go in the car?” said Mr. Spence; “I shan’t be using it tomorrow. You don’t want it, do you, Helen?”

“No, dear, I’ve my Dorcas meeting,” said Mrs. Spence.

“I suppose Dollie wouldn’t feel up to going?” said Mr. Spence.

Jock shook her head.

“No; she’s taken a dislike to motoring; she says she can’t stand the vibration yet.”

“Here’s Ruth,” said Mrs. Spence. They watched her come across the lawn; the afternoon was intensely hot, even though the sun was low; perhaps that accounted for the droop of her head.

She came up and greeted Jock and received the news of the prospective trip with her usual sweet agreement. Her parents noted the fact approvingly. Ruth’s interest in the

## A SHOPPING EXPEDITION

little pleasures of her home life was undiminished. The unseemly incident of Fowles' proposal appeared already as unreal as an almost forgotten dream.

"I never believe in choosing curtains from a pattern," Jock explained. "I'd come up to suggest we bicycled, but the car would be a great treat. We could see the cathedral, too; and have tea; and if we motor we needn't leave here till after lunch."

"It sounds delightful," said Ruth.

The journey was settled therefore, and Ruth walked down to the gate with Jock, and stood for a few minutes after she had wheeled down the road.

For some time hers had been the most trying of all experiences: that of waiting. She had no idea where Fowles was or what he was doing. A brief note had come, written as he had promised in the train after their meeting when they had pledged their troth. Then had followed the letter to her father and his answer; and thenceforward, nothing.

Ruth did not know in what part of the country his new home was situated. As days passed into weeks and still no word came, Ruth had need of all her faith to comfort and sustain her.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

Martha and Michael probably knew where and how he was ; but as a tentative inquiry had been overlooked Ruth did not like to repeat the question. She knew Martha was already suspicious, and not wholly friendly. It had occurred to her that Fowles might have spoken of his plans to Dollie, but the doctor had given the strictest orders that everything that might recall the London nightmare was to be kept from her ; and though Dollie was convalescent Ruth did not get an opportunity of quiet talk. Dollie seemed to shrink from being alone with her, even though she was planning great things for the Industry, and talking of coming back to her old place in the work-room.

On every side a blank wall seemed to have descended, and Ruth had to hold on to her trust and walk in patience. But this afternoon, as she was studying the Bible lesson of the week, it had seemed to come so strongly that she was forgetting the resource that was always nigh. Why had she not asked ? Therefore, humbly, but with unquestioning confidence, she had asked to know.

She had put all responsibility away, and there was no anxiety in the eyes that looked quietly along the road. Yet there was an



## A SHOPPING EXPEDITION

awed look in them. She had only to go forward, following the light she saw, and the way would open. With God alone, the power and wisdom and certain execution of His will. All that Ruth had to do was to believe that He was governing, and to do her best each day, leaving His children in His care. Fowles was not alone. She must have no sense of responsibility for his welfare.

The next day brought the same hot stillness, and Jock and Ruth, in the freshest and coolest of muslins, mounted the car in the assurance of at least a breath of air. The motor started with its usual ease, and the girls rested comfortably while unfamiliar lanes and meadows appeared and vanished and the road before them crumpled up like ribbon.

The town of Coombe stood upon a hill, and the spire of the cathedral started out with dramatic suddenness against the sky, and grew in height and majesty as they approached.

Coombe was one of those old-fashioned towns which remain the centre of a county shopping district, although the trail of factory and red-brick villas had not yet appeared. The streets were fringed with trees, and the old Grammar School and Market House were only two of the quaint sights which gave the town its

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

charm. The car drew up before a row of windows, in which furniture and fabrics made pleasant harmonies, and the girls passed through into the shade of the interior. An electric fan cooled the atmosphere and well-bred quiet prevailed. Jock was soon engrossed in viewing chintzes and cretonnes, with Ruth's never-failing sympathy to help the choice.

Then voices sounded from a further room and a lady came out, apparently exceedingly disturbed.

"It won't do at all," she was saying. "It's most annoying, when I must have everything to match. It's ridiculous to say you can't guarantee that exact shade in the dye. Of course you can match it if you're told to. The truth is you don't want to take the trouble."

"We will do our best; only I must repeat that we cannot guarantee the perfect shade," said a voice that both girls knew; and Ruth turned to see Fowles. He had not seen them; his customer occupied too much attention. Ruth marvelled at the courtesy of his manner, yet somehow she knew he was hard pressed to keep controlled.

"Well, I certainly shall return the stuff if it doesn't match, and go elsewhere," said

## A SHOPPING EXPEDITION

the lady as a parting shot, and sailed through the shop and into her carriage without the most distant parting salutation.

Fowles escorted her to the door, opened it, and stood for a moment waiting to see whether she was going to take further notice of him. His face looked tired and irritated as he turned ; the heat was making everybody cross. He came up the shop rather slowly until he was almost by Ruth, and then stopped suddenly. Jock was holding out her hand with a cry of astonished salutation.

"How do you do?" said Fowles, with a formality that set her at arm's-length at once.

But Jock was not to be suppressed in that way.

"How lucky to come on you like this!" she cried, improving the situation slightly because of her unconsciousness of any awkwardness. "We hadn't the least idea that you were here. Now you can help me choose my curtains, for I'm utterly distracted."

"Perhaps you're busy," said Ruth. She had noticed the coldness of his manner. And besides, was she free to speak to him? Yet she had not promised to avoid him if they met. She held back as much as possible, but she could not deliberately hurt him.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"I have to see to something," said he. "It's early closing day. We shut at four."

"You *must* consult with me in that case," cried Jock; "I never choose right in a hurry."

"I'll be back in a few minutes," said Fowles, and went past quickly.

"If it wasn't for the excellence of his taste I wouldn't stand his airs a minute," said Jock irrepressibly. "I should have thought his reverses would have humanised him. I never could stand him, but I was sorry for him."

Ruth did not speak; she was holding to the knowledge that God was ever present and governing all His children. If it was His will, the way would open for her and Fowles to speak together. She could only wait, and be glad sincerely that His will, not hers, would be done.

Yet as the fingers of the clock moved on her heart did beat more quickly. The tall figure appeared as the hour struck. When the decision was made, Jock expressed her thanks and followed one audacious step with another.

"We want to go to the cathedral," she remarked. "I suppose you couldn't complete your ministrations by taking us round? I

## A SHOPPING EXPEDITION

mistrust my architectural knowledge, and I like to see what should be seen."

"I shall be very glad," said Fowles, in the distant voice; and soon they were out in the High Street with him. Ruth could not help being happy. She had been granted an oasis in the wilderness, unexpectedly and wonderfully. She felt as if something was leading both of them, and could wait. His manner was strange, but she had been given now an opportunity to see how he was growing. She saw by the firm lines of his face that he had grown.

The tour of the cathedral was absorbingly interesting, and when they came out on to a wall descending to the street far down below, Ruth leant over the parapet, welcoming the sudden entrance into light and space after the confined beauties of the nave.

Fowles and Jock lingered on the doorstep, and presently Ruth looked round to see Fowles alone. He remained by the door a few yards away; and she turned away, again wondering at his silence. And then the thought flashed on her that perhaps he had repented of his offer and wanted to be free.

The town was shrouded in a haze of heat, and the distant landscape seemed to tremble as

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

behind a shimmering veil. Everything was absolutely silent; close above their heads the cathedral walls rose, awe-inspiring. Never had Ruth felt so terrible a solitude. If Fowles wished to withdraw and dreaded seeing her . . .

"Nice view, isn't it?" said a polite voice beside her.

"Very," said Ruth.

Again they stood in silence. Ruth broke the silence. She could not bear it a minute longer.

"How is your mother?" said she.

"Very well," said Fowles; and in a minute added: "She is abroad; some friends of hers are travelling round the world and have taken her to help them select curios. They've come into money lately and are ambitious to have taste."

"I'm so glad," murmured Ruth.

"For her release or mine?" asked Fowles. He was leaning on the parapet, close to Ruth.

"I was glad for her sake," answered Ruth.

"Yes; she couldn't have lived through the scene you witnessed, could she?" said Fowles, still in the detached voice. "And each day may bring such. She wouldn't even come down to see the place. When she was well

## A SHOPPING EXPEDITION

enough to hear the fatal step, she nearly had a relapse ; the need of cutting adrift, however, nerved her, and she fixed up this sea voyage in a week. It was really rather young of me to have felt responsible for the charge of my mother. My effort at duty seems to have parted us for ever. That's the main reason I have for sticking to it."

"I didn't know where you were," said Ruth, almost indistinguishably. "Why didn't you write?"

"Why didn't you?" said Fowles, in the same tense voice.

"I was waiting," said Ruth.

"I've been waiting, too," said Fowles; "waiting for centuries. I've forgotten the time when I was free. I've run myself into a noose, and I suppose I can't in honour break it, can I?"

"Yes," said Ruth. "Oh, yes!" Her eyes were wide open; she was staring out across the fair champaign like a bird pinned against the wall and helpless. He wanted to escape from her.

"Oh, you're free if you want to be," said Ruth. "How could you think I should wish, for a single moment, if you—if you——"

"Ruth!" said a hoarse voice, now close,

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

close beside her. "You didn't think I meant I wanted to be free from you? Why, you wouldn't face what it means now you've seen! You wouldn't wish to come to me, here!"

"Oh, if you'd let me!" said Ruth, and her hand was being held. Only that, for they were high on the cathedral wall, two specks against a rampart that was seen for miles.

"It's worse than I thought; much worse," said Fowles.

"I know," said Ruth. "But it will go; oh, I know it will."

"What will?" asked Fowles, finding the small hand wonderfully comforting.

"Your pride," said Ruth, glancing up innocently. "It must be less now, even if the change doesn't show. I know that you've been trying."

"I'm afraid I've not been trying to do anything but endure," said Fowles. "The pride isn't less for being hit. It's bigger, uglier."

"People are unreasonable sometimes," said Ruth. "But we can't be worried because of other people's faults."

"You can when the people are exercising their faults on you," said Fowles. "And when its beneath you to show your mind."



## A SHOPPING EXPEDITION

"But you'd never do that," said Ruth, and drew herself up. "You can't conquer faults with anger, can you? Only with love."

"Now, my darling girl, could even you have felt love to some one who treated you as if you didn't exist?" asked Fowles.

"Yes," said Ruth, smiling in a charming way. "You looked over my head as if I didn't exist when you saw me down there, but do you think it made any difference?"

"Didn't it?" said Fowles, and tightened his hold. "Oh, Ruth, do you know what you're saying? You can't mean you'll come to me here, away from every one and everything. Do you honestly mean to say your people will consent?"

"I don't know," said Ruth, almost voicelessly; and then lifted her eyes to Fowles and said, "But if they don't, I can't help it; when you are ready I shall come."

"I'm ready now," said Fowles, in a queer, breathless way. "But I can't let you come. I should be a hound to let you; I mustn't hold you."

"You are behaving ridiculously," said Ruth, releasing her hand and becoming prosaic as the only means of bringing the situation into normal bounds. "This is a delightful town

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

to live in, and your work would interest me ; and now that your mother is away you are by yourself, and there are no complications except of your own making. I think you need some one to help you. See how uncomfortable your pride is making you ; you need some one to help you loosen it and let it go. It would push me away from you just when you are ready. Oh, don't let it ! ”

“ You'd be cast off by your people,” said Fowles.

“ It mayn't come to that,” said Ruth, looking however as if she were ready to face the very worst. “ Oh, it won't come to that, because we're each doing the best we know. We have only to go right on and we shall be taken care of. You said you'd trust.”

“ If you were here ! I can't imagine it ! ” said Fowles. “ It isn't really so bad : I like a lot of the work. In fact, I'm an idiot to mind the little things ; they seem big when they're happening. But it's you, Ruth ! We should only have a tiny home.”

“ Like Martha's,” said Ruth.

“ Yes,” said Fowles. “ Why, I suppose I have as much as Keene.”

“ They're happy,” said Ruth, smiling in recollection.

## A SHOPPING EXPEDITION

"Yes; they don't even have a maid now," said Fowles. "I'd forgotten, somehow, that they lived so simply."

"I'm not a bad housekeeper," Ruth ventured, and the hand was held again.

"It's you I want: your way of seeing things," said Fowles. "You're like the sun. How could I ever have thought that you'd draw back? I couldn't again. I know now."

"I know too," said Ruth, and they looked at each other and saw faith and hope and courage shining through.

"We've fixed nothing," said Fowles. "May I write?"

Ruth shook her head.

"No," said she. "I've given my promise not to write or let you come to my home for a year. Then my people will have the chance of seeing we're both in earnest. They want to be certain of that; and they will be, I am sure. But if they don't agree then, and I see there's no chance of their changing, I shall come. It may be necessary to do that to make them understand how much I care."

"I'm afraid there's not much chance of people's dispositions changing," said Fowles grimly.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Yours is," said Ruth. "And with my people it's *only* that they can't understand anything quite new in a minute. I've changed, I think. Life changes every one; or perhaps it gives us the chance to prove our qualities. You're proving yours now, aren't you?"

Fowles did not answer for a minute; his face was oddly hesitant. When he spoke it was with an uncertainty that was wholly foreign to his usual manner.

"I wonder!" said he. "Perhaps our qualities are always there, but we use them wrongly: go after wrong ambitions, possibly; think wrong things give us pleasure. Then we get an idea, a vague glimmer of something that we feel is better, and go after that, and that leads us into ways we shouldn't have thought possible——" He broke off, hesitating again, as if he scarcely knew how to express himself.

"Dearest," said he, "you know how much you've meant to me. You did start me; your faith made me feel I could do things, in a way: at least, it made me want to do them. But since I've come here I've found out for myself that there's something more to do than one's own private business. Will

## A SHOPPING EXPEDITION

you think it perfectly ridiculous to hear I'm helping with a Boys' Brigade? There's an awfully fine Canon here that I've made friends with. He collects china, and I've put him in the way of getting things. And then he asked me to give him a hand with this Brigade business. I'm going to take charge of a camp next month. They're odd little beggars; some of them are fiendishly cruel through sheer ignorance, and they're all inclined to be barbaric; but there's a lot of decent stuff in them. You'd be surprised how they take up notions you'd say were far too visionary and high for them. The Christian knight idea, for instance. The Canon puts it rippingly."

"I'm so glad," said Ruth, smiling—smiling at the shimmering, sun-filled plain. She had always known; but it was good to hear the proof.

"You mustn't think I'm having a bad time," said Fowles. "I don't pretend that I don't want you; but there are other things I care for—now. It's as if a big ideal has been put up before one, and there's only one real end: to get there, even if it isn't all a path of roses. And it's extraordinary how interesting the way becomes. This camp,

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

now, is taking all my thoughts, sleeping and waking, pretty well. The lads have got to get something worth while from it, not only fresh air. They've got to get a clearer vision; that means mine must be clearer. It's a big thing, trying to help those little chaps."

"You'll be shown how," said Ruth.

"It's good to think that; but one feels so rotten. How can I teach them to obey, and put their hearts into their work, and not start grizzling or quibbling—when I want to lose my temper half a dozen times a day? I need the Canon's teaching infinitely more than they do."

"Can't you have it?" said Ruth, dimpling.

"Oh, I go and hear him," said Fowles in a half-ashamed voice. "The cathedral's rather a jolly place to come into when one's bothered. And you can't expect the boys to do what you don't do yourself. Besides, I don't come altogether because of that. It's a pleasant change from outside, where living seems such labour. You drop all that."

"And then, afterwards, it's easier," said Ruth softly. "But living oughtn't to be labour: it ought surely to be service."

"You put things just as nicely," said

## A SHOPPING EXPEDITION

Fowles, looking at her in a way that made her eyes fall. Then, while they stood silent, they were recalled to earth by Jock's voice, sharp and urgent, close beside them.

"Time to start! The car's round."

"Oh, and we've had no tea," said Ruth, too penitent to be confused.

"I have," said Jock. "That's where I've been. You'd have time for a cup."

"I don't want any," said Ruth; and then remembered it was odd that Jock had disappeared like that. They had to re-enter the cathedral; Jock had gone on again, and she raised inquiring eyes to Fowles.

"I asked her to let me speak to you," said he bluntly; "I couldn't see any other way. I'm afraid she knows, now. Still, you can trust her. I never used to like her, but I think I shall."

"You asked her," saith Ruth, in a great breath of relief. "Then you did want——?"

"I was starving," said Fowles. "You know starving people are glad to look in through a pane of glass. I didn't hope to be let in and told that everything was mine."

"Everything that I can give," said Ruth in a little prayer; and then they were out on the cathedral steps, with the motor standing

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

by the curb below and the town clocks chiming and striking five.

There was no fear in Ruth as the motor set off on its homeward run, but there was a certain shyness. Jock maintained a studiously impersonal attitude, commenting on trees or building as they passed. It was not until the car had left all signs of the town behind and was speeding through a hazel wood that Ruth ventured to explain the meeting.

"I was glad to see Mr. Fowles," said she; "I didn't know where he was; and he didn't know I didn't know. Thank you, Jock."

"I could do no less than go when I was told to," answered Jock. "I was never more startled in my life though. I didn't know you'd ever met him more than perhaps once. The idea of your being friends was a revelation; he's the last person I'd have thought you'd have a thing in common with. Don't you find him impossibly conceited?"

"No," said Ruth.

"He was the most unpopular man in all the studios in London," Jock continued. "Except that he was so unpopular he became almost popular because of it. When you met him the occasion invariably stood out,



## A SHOPPING EXPEDITION

he had such a knack of irritating ; he quite conferred distinction on any one he visited, because he was so honest you felt he'd never come near a person unless he really wanted to ; at least, Michael called him honest for it. I call it sheer selfishness."

"Oh, please don't," said Ruth, and Jock was brought up by the look on her companion's face.

"You're not—— There's nothing——" gasped Jock inarticulately.

"I thought you knew," said Ruth.

"Know! How should I know?" said Jock, still almost speechless. "It was like Fowles to say out straight he wanted to talk with you and ask me in so many words to keep out of the way. I thought it was his usual bad manners. But Ruth, dear, you can't seriously be thinking——"

"Yes," said Ruth. "But nobody knows. You see, my people don't feel his position is settled."

"It's more settled than Michael's was or is," said Jock. "There's nothing more uncertain than the artistic profession ; Fowles has had good sense to put his talent into trade."

"That's it," said Ruth, almost indistinguishably.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Well, I never did," said Jock, falling back into her corner as if completely overcome. "Why don't they object to me and Michael? What are we doing but selling. And you and Dollie, what have you done but try to sell? What's the work-room for?"

"I know," said Ruth; "but, you see, you and Michael make what you sell."

"So does a cobbler," said Jock.

"But you don't sell your things in shops," said Ruth.

"I would, like a shot," said Jock, "if they'd give my terms; Michael's colour-books are sold in shops."

"When they're printed," said Ruth. "There's a little something between you and the public."

"There was not the ghost of a veil between Dollie and her public. Her trouble was, the public wasn't there," said Jock. "Why, Fowles is in a far more substantial and responsible position; it's absurd to compare our influence on the public taste with what he can wield. Look at us to-day! We've motored twenty miles to get the stuff his firm sells because of their taste. Why can't you look at him as the head of a big educational centre? That's what a shop is if the owner

## A SHOPPING EXPEDITION

has the intelligence to make it one. And Fowles is manager of all the taste department. Why, we're pettifogging hucksters compared to him. I've never liked him, and his appreciation of my society to-day has not improved my opinion of him; but I'll give every one his due."

"I wish my people could hear you," said Ruth.

"My dear, there's one set prejudice nobody can alter except time or a terrible catastrophe, and that's the prejudice that people hold towards the person whom a member of their family's going to marry," said Jock, with deep conviction. "My advice is, go your way, and don't attempt to influence those against you. In the first place, you can't do it; and secondly, marriage is no one's business but the two who undertake it."

"I can't see that," said Ruth. "One surely ought to consider the people who love you more than any one in the world; and who trust you, too."

"Why don't they trust your opinion, then, on a subject only you can possibly know anything about?" asked Jock.

"People forget their children grow up," said Ruth, looking ahead in a very puzzled

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

way. "They want them to be safe and happy."

"So they prevent their problematical unhappiness by making it a glowing reality," said Jock. "I wonder how many children have had their happiness improved by their parents' criticism of their love affairs. I never knew good come of interference yet. If people aren't suited to each other, and you let them see plenty of each other, it gives them the chance to find it out. There's no need to encourage what you don't believe in, but a dignified non-partisanship is a vastly different thing from dictatorial interference. Nobody takes advice, so I won't add to the blunder of giving it. You've probably had enough from your respected father."

"That's it," said Ruth. "I do respect him. I know he's only under a misconception, and I can't help being sure some day he'll understand. We both don't mind waiting."

"It'll certainly be a healthy experience for Mr. Fowles," said Jock. "But if you'll excuse me, Ruth, you're one of the women who might wait a bit too long. In your heart you can't help a slight preference for a condition that needs patience. I think those round you get a little spoilt. They need to

## A SHOPPING EXPEDITION

realise the truth about themselves, and they don't when there's always a pink shade on the light. Look at Dollie now."

"My dear Jock, I've been frank enough with Dollie," said Ruth.

"Well, now, I'm inclined to believe you," murmured Jock, rather thoughtfully. "Somehow I gathered you weren't so much to one another."

"I feel the same," said Ruth. "I've always seen."

"Yes, but she didn't realise that," said Jock. "I don't pretend that people like a clear light; but they've got to wake up before they can do better, so it's no use bothering about their preference for sleep. I think I'll have a talk myself with Dollie one of these days. There's no love lost between us, so there'll be none to spoil; and somehow I fancy she's the sort of girl who is secretly fascinated by her enemies. I'm a bit like that myself. I'd be a better friend with Dollie than ever you could be."

"Why do you say that?" said Ruth, rather breathlessly, for one of the ties that seemed to bind her to Amesbury was Dollie's dependence on her friendship.

"You're at once too saintly and clear-

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

sighted," said Jock. "I'm just clear-sighted. I'd stand no nonsense, and she'd know it. You forgive her and bear with her, and she takes advantage of the fact, and feels you're foolish. She can't live up to your ideals nor understand them at present; and so she wants to tear them down and show there's nothing in you or your behaviour to justify her uncomfortableness. She's not the first who's thought to be more comfortable by pulling down what puts them in the wrong."

"But Dollie doesn't want to pull me down," said Ruth, rather pale now. "We've been friends since we were tiny. She's still weak, and that makes her irritable."

"Hum," said Jock. "I'm always vowing I'll not impart what I observe; and I always remember to keep my vow after I've broken it. Still, don't put too much trust in Dollie. I wouldn't tell her now, if I were you, about anything you didn't want to come out a bit distorted. Your understanding with Mr. Fowles, for instance."

"But of course I haven't told her," said Ruth, flushing deeply. "I haven't said a word to Martha. I shouldn't have said anything to you."

"You can trust me," said Jock gruffly.

## A SHOPPING EXPEDITION

"I know," said Ruth. "But my people wouldn't like any one knowing; and that's why I wish I hadn't——"

"Oh, do consider the proposition independently for once," said Jock. "You may need a friend; and I'm that, Ruth. I think you're foolish, sometimes; but I've never found you speak or act against your principles, although they're so impossibly high. I don't yet understand the why, but it's undeniable some folks take their pleasure in self-sacrifice."

"There's no pleasure when you think of yourself," said Ruth in a low voice. "There's no other way of being happy but by trying to go the way that's right. I suppose the reason why everybody doesn't do right is that they don't see the right way. Father and mother are quite sure they are right. They don't want to do anything else but right."

"It's a pity they can't give you the credit for the same intention and ability," said Jock. "They might be agreeably surprised at the way things turned out. Now I'm going to say a funny thing, considering the low opinion I've always held of Mr. Fowles. It may be the best thing for you to have to go

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

through all the opposition that any one who knew him would feel at the idea of such a girl as you being thrown away on him. It may give you the touch of backbone that you need. The best bred little dog has to be thrown in the water sometimes before he'll learn to swim."

"But I know we'll come through," said Ruth. "You see, Jock, I don't believe it's I who've got the responsibility. I'm ready to swim; I really am; and if something comes up to be crossed, I don't think I shall be one bit afraid to plunge. That's why I can wait in patience. I *know* everything is going to turn out well."

"Did you know about the Industry?" asked Jock.

"I know it still," said Ruth. "I never felt the London showroom was a right idea, but that mistake won't hurt the Industry in the long run. We shall do all the better for the experience."

"Hum!" said Jock. "Well, I feel more inclined to trust you than your parents, even though my trust implies the beginning of a faith that something more than you is behind you. I can't get away from the fact that you're consistent as well as certain;



## A SHOPPING EXPEDITION

and such certainty about the good God has in store for you, have I never seen before in man or woman or child."

"Could God have anything else but good for His children if He is Love?" asked Ruth, and the clouds vanished like mist before the morning sun. "There's Amesbury church above those trees."

"You needn't fear I'll ever let out a word about your meeting," said Jock comfortingly.

"Thank you," said Ruth.

She had the problem still before her as to how much she should tell.

When she came up to the town, however, and saw her father bending over his rose-trees, she made no hesitation, but went straight to him.

"We have enjoyed ourselves," said she. "And father, dear, we didn't know, but we saw Mr. Fowles. He's in the shop where we went. He took us over the cathedral and we had a talk. We both haven't changed, and we never shall. I promised to consult you; I think that includes telling you, don't you?"

Ruth had slipped her arm in his as had always been her habit when she came with confidences.

"I am glad you have told me," said her

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

father. "Very glad. But, my dear child, my opinion has not altered. In fact, the possibility of such an encounter in—er—such a place, makes me all the more confirmed. I do hope you have not made any rash arrangement."

"We're not going to write," said Ruth, very simply. "We have agreed to go on waiting."

"If it were anything else," said her father, touched inexpressibly by the trusting, honest eyes. "My dear, you know I've always acted for your good. You'll thank me from the bottom of your heart if I have to keep on seeming harsh."

"Not harsh," said Ruth. "I said we are ready to wait, only I wanted you to know."

Ruth went into the house and Mr. Spence resumed his watering. "If she were fretting it might be more difficult," he thought. "But she has such good sense. She must see; she will see; the spell will wear off. Such flashes-in-the-pan always do. Why, I remember myself——"

Dear, dear, how unreal all love troubles become in time!

## CHAPTER XII

### IN THE GARDEN

A WHITE cloth covered the table in the linen room on which were set the trays of lavender. This year's crop had been abundant and the fragrant stalks were piled in masses ; when they were touched stray flowers dropped off on to the cloth, to be carefully collected in their turn. A rosy-faced maid was sewing up the bags which Mrs. Keene had filled.

The window was shaded by pear-tree boughs and looked out on a row of mulberry trees, before which marigolds and rosemary sprang up. A pile of bags being now completed, the maid departed to lay them in the chests upstairs, and Mrs. Keene placed her tray upon the window-seat and sat down in the rush-seated arm-chair. Her fingers touched each spray with loving care, and her eyes, undimmed by years, superintended the adjustment of each fragment in the farthest

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

corners of the little bags. She was not too preoccupied however to recognise her husband's step when it sounded, firm and springing, on the path. She looked up welcomingly.

"We've a lot of peas," said Mr. Keene. "If Martha comes up, she might have some. Theirs are over."

"She'll be here to fetch her butter," returned Mrs. Keene. "There are mulberries too; she must have some of those."

"Perhaps Michael will be up to-day now his cartoons are gone," said Mr. Keene. "I suppose he'll have nothing to do now till he knows if his are accepted."

"I can't imagine Michael with no work to do," smiled his mother.

"He's been at it more than usually closely for some time," said Mr. Keene, looking a little anxious. "I do trust they've had everything they want. You might inquire from Martha how they're off for money, and bring in a suggestion of a little temporary help. They must be running low. Let's see, it's September: six months since Michael's had anything come in."

"I am sure they have not lacked," pleaded Mrs. Keene. "Michael has done well to trust, and their happy faces are witnesses

## IN THE GARDEN

that they have been cared for. They have weathered the time and are nearly at the end ; let us leave them to come through if they wish to come in independence. You yourself, at Michael's age, thought much of standing by yourself."

"I only wished to give from our abundance," said Mr. Keene, with a strangely humble air. "Michael is my son ; all we have is his. Why should he not take it now ?"

"He, too, has chosen to stand alone," said Mrs. Keene. "He has a wife and home, and feels the duty of a man is to support them. He has made a great step out from fear in trusting that the strength and means to do his best work will be given him, and Martha has stood by him bravely. They will not suffer, dear. The Father of all is taking care of them, and if He wishes us to help them, we shall be shown. As long as the children want to earn their way I feel we ought not to hinder with offers of help."

"Well, they might have some eggs," said Mr. Keene, still somewhat anxious. "Just see that she takes anything we have in that way."

"Indeed I will," said Mrs. Keene. "Believe me, there is no fear that they will starve so near to us."

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"God bless you!" said her husband. "I know I fidget. I'll leave them alone! Well, I must be off to meet Mr. Avons about that land at the Five Corners. It's come to me that I must give more than the land up to the hedge; we ought to cut a great sweep, right up to the spinney, if that road is to be safe with all this motor traffic. That would open the three roads. Do you agree?"

"It does not seem as if we could use the land to better purpose," said his wife, and Mr. Keene went off comforted and rested by the sureness of her voice and smile. Mrs. Keene continued her work with the light in her face all the sweeter for the memory of her husband's visit; when the door opened and showed Martha the light broke into radiance.

"I'm rather early," said Martha, coming in with the happy ease of one who knew that welcome waited. "But everything finished early this morning. Some days the work seems to crumple into nothing. I'm trying to see Saturday as the day of preparation for the day of praise, and so I must do everything as a thank-offering; and now I love Saturdays instead of being afraid of the extra work; and they often turn out to be the finest-feeling days of any."

## IN THE GARDEN

Martha had ensconced herself on the window-seat and bent her head now to inhale the fragrance from the lavender. She did not look as if she were suffering from privation. Her dark-blue linen frock was beautifully ironed and her glowing cheeks and glossy hair were the picture of health. Not a line marred the open countenance that turned all unsuspicious to her husband's mother.

"I hear Michael's work is done," said Mrs. Keene.

"The cartoons," said Martha. "Yes; they're packed and sent, and the studio looks empty. There's space for the book! By the by, I didn't tell you one has been sent for him to illustrate at once: Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey; he has heaps of sketches, so has all the material to hand. Isn't it beautiful that the work has come the moment he is ready for it?"

There was a touch of relief in Martha's expression: the peace that comes when a difficult passage is through—at last.

"So you're quite comfortable?" said Mrs. Keene.

"Quite," sighed Martha. Mrs. Keene continued to sew with orderly ease; the quiet of the room invited confidence; Martha clasped

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

her knees and leant back against the window post.

"It's wonderful how little you can live on," said she. "You wouldn't believe how little we've spent since April. I've found out one thing, and that is that the cost of a servant is far more than her wages. It isn't what she eats, it's what she doesn't trouble to save. When you have charge of your own kitchen you find out how much use there is in the bits. Housekeeping becomes more interesting too when you feel you have power over every detail."

"So you've enjoyed the experiment?" said Mrs. Keene.

"Enjoyed it! Why, I'm never going to have a maid again even if we could afford it," cried Martha. "Why, even cleaning rooms takes no more time than—than regular practising on a piano. I take an hour and a half first thing each morning, and never miss; and the cleaning becomes insignificant, although my rooms are spotless. Of course there are no pots and jars and photographs to dust. Michael says ours is like a Japanese house!"

"I've some more work for you," said Mrs. Keene. "There are peas and mulberries to



## IN THE GARDEN

spare if you like to pick them. We are busy to-day, because Mr. Fowles arrives this morning and we have extra cooking and his room to make ready."

"Mr. Fowles! I didn't know he was coming," said Martha. "How can he get away?"

"Mr. Benbridge is glad for him to come to us," said Mrs. Keene. "Mr. Benbridge is an old friend of Mr. Keene's, you know; though it is not through that alone that he takes interest in Mr. Fowles."

"I can't imagine Mr. Fowles doing anything regular," said Martha. "Much less work that needs self-suppression! He has been so spoilt."

"He has many great qualities," said Mrs. Keene quietly; "qualities too great to spoil."

"What?" said Martha, rather unbelievably.

"Sincerity," said Mrs. Keene. "And reverence. It needs greatness to see greatness, just as it needs a beautiful mind to see beauty and wisdom to understand it. Mr. Fowles both sees and understands."

"But mother, dear, he *is* selfish," cried Martha.

"I have no evidence but his own word,

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

which in this one instance is not wholly reliable," said Mrs. Keene, with a twinkle. "How has he been selfish in his relations with you?"

"He hasn't," said Martha. "Of course he's been very generous. But he had the reputation, really."

"Perhaps he was indifferent to the aims and pleasures of those amongst whom he found himself," said Mrs. Keene. "But possibly that was only because he wanted higher aims and did not know the way to gain them. Directly he saw he tried to follow."

"You mean, in taking that position," said Martha. "But he had to do something; and after all, it was the only chance that was offered."

"He saw before then, my dear," said Mrs. Keene, with rather curious reserve. "But now you must trot into the garden and get your fruit while I go up to see that everything is ready."

Martha had filled a basket with peas and had reached the mulberry trees when a straw hat appeared above the leaves and a familiar voice called out: "I've been sent to help; how are you?"

"How do you do?" said Martha. "The bushes are rather thick and very dewy."

## IN THE GARDEN

"I can just get in," said Fowles, pushing in through the bushes. "I'm smaller since we last met."

"I—I'm sorry," said Martha, uncomfortable and confused. Fowles was not the sort of person to whom one could proffer sympathy.

"Well, I'm rather pleased," said Fowles, answering her literally and with an unconscious air that was sardonically deliberate. "I got frightfully in the way of myself. Now I'm beginning to fit into the place Providence has allotted, and consequently I don't get so many bumps."

"There aren't nearly so many bumps, are there, if you do settle down where you're placed?" said Martha comfortingly; and added, "I was thinking so a little while ago when I was talking to Mrs. Keene. It occurred to me then how easily we had come through a time that had seemed almost impossibly difficult. By the by, it began when you were with us—six months, isn't it, this very day?"

"You!" said Fowles, dropping a leaf of berries into Martha's basket. "Do you mean to say that you and Michael have troubles?"

"Difficulties," corrected Martha. "We don't make them troubles. We suddenly had to live on two pounds a week for everything."

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"You couldn't," said Fowles.

"We decided we could ; and then we found it would have to be twenty-two shillings, because Michael had to have the rest for models," said Martha, with dancing eyes. "The ridiculous part about the difficulty was that lots of people bring up large families on that. However, it was a bit of a struggle when clothes were needed, but we did it ; and really since we've become used to the scale of living we've never noticed anything unusual in it. It is the most remarkable thing how remarkable experiences become ordinary, even commonplace. Don't you notice that with marriages ? "

Fowles cast a quick glance ; Martha was picking in entire unconsciousness.

"Look at Jock," said she. "There couldn't have been a greater disturbance than that marriage made, and yet everybody takes them for granted now. We're going home for a visit when Michael's book is done, and you don't know the relief of feeling there's no family skeleton to greet us. Ruth says Jock is one of the family, and Aunt Margaret is ever so pleased that Bob has such a comfortable home."

"You think, then, that the best conciliator

## IN THE GARDEN

is success ? ” murmured Fowles, bending down to investigate the lower branches.

“ Well, it’s the best proof that people’s fears are wrong, isn’t it ? ” laughed Martha. “ In fact, it’s the only proof. If my relations had known the position we were facing six months ago they’d have been hysterical ; and yet we’ve come through as happy as possible, and heaps better for it. I don’t believe there’s any situation in this world that’s difficult if you do the best you can without troubling about other people’s opinions. My people were upset when they learned I hadn’t a maid, but they’re used to the eccentricity now ; there’s nothing people don’t get used to if you don’t worry about the thing yourself.”

“ There are some prejudices that are almost insurmountable,” said Fowles.

“ Almost, not quite,” said Martha, waxing more and more confidential. “ Opening the door yourself is, I think, the very worst of all. I didn’t like doing that to callers ; and then it suddenly dawned on me that I’d always opened the door at my studio, and nobody thought twice about the matter there ; and then I thought : What are Michael and I living but a studio life ? and then I saw how

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

much nearer the welcome was when you opened the door of your home yourself; and how, in the same way, you had the opportunity of guarding your home, and how no one could be turned away who had been sent. One was in touch with the world. Now I love opening the door; and every time I go I know there's something to do or to give, if it's only a smile."

"Should you feel that way to people who come into a shop?" said Fowles.

"Yes; they have all come for something from you," answered Martha. "It must be beautiful to meet such a lot of people in that way, especially when you have beautiful things to give them."

"Sell them," muttered Fowles.

"It's all the same," said Martha thoughtfully, "if you sell things of value in the right way. The patience and kindness are the things you give. I think that's why Ruth likes the work-room. She enjoys serving. Sometimes disagreeable people come in; in fact, most people come selfishly, only thinking about getting the most they can for themselves; but Ruth is so happy to wait on them and so glad to please them that the crossiest go out different. But then, Ruth is an angel."

## IN THE GARDEN

Fowles appeared to have discovered a treasure trove close to the ground. His voice came indistinctly through the leaves.

"How is she?" said he.

"Very well; she always is," said Martha, and then remembered her suspicions. "We're having lovely weather."

"Lovely," said Fowles, rising up. "Do you think your people could ever overcome their prejudice to any one who served in a shop?"

"I—I don't know," said Martha, paling underneath the tan. "N—no: I'm afraid they couldn't."

"You said any prejudice was overcome in time," said Fowles, dropping the berries one by one into the basket.

"But not that one," said Martha. "Ruth herself could never—would never——"

"She doesn't mind," said Fowles, uncannily cool. He had been picking a lot of berries, and Martha had to receive the tardy stream.

"But then she doesn't think of any of the things of this world," said Martha, with a quick instinct of responsibility and protection. "It wouldn't be fair to take advantage of it. People always do, and it's a shame."

"Like when you asked her to stay with you

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

and clean the studio," said Fowles, in his clean, clipped voice.

"I don't see disgrace in housework ; nor does she," cried Martha.

"She doesn't see disgrace in serving in a shop," said Fowles.

"But my people do ; all her relations do," gasped Martha.

"Miss Harvey's," inquired Fowles. There was no humility in his address. Martha's cheeks were blazing.

"Yes, we did mind ; and her mother's taken her away," said Martha. "The work-room's different. Besides, Dollie and Ruth are girls."

"And serving in a shop is not man's work," said Fowles, letting the last berries fall together. "That's what you mean, isn't it ?"

"Oh no," said Martha, clinging to the basket handle with a sudden sick realisation. "Oh no. Please don't think I meant—— I was only thinking of Ruth. I suppose I'm jealous for her. I didn't mean anything—anything—against you."

"Then what's your objection ?" said Fowles, searching Martha's agitated face.

"Nothing tangible," said Martha. "Really, nothing tangible. Only, I'm sure it wouldn't



## IN THE GARDEN

do. You see, I know Ruth so well. She's not the sort of girl who thinks about such things. She'd be distressed if such a thing were hinted. She's more like a saint than a girl. If any man spoke to her in that way, she'd hate it. It would only pain her; shock her. Oh, you mustn't!"

Martha continued to hold on to the basket as if it were a life-buoy; her companion regarded her for a few moments in silence, as if he were considering the wisdom of his answer. Then he spoke with studied gentleness.

"Your sister accepted me the fourth time I saw her," said Fowles. "Then I gave her the chance of being free after she'd seen me in the shop, and she refused to take it. She is more certain of making me happy than I am of making her, only I think I'll be grateful enough to make up. Do you know, you don't know Ruth one half as well as I do? Do you know that none of you know her at all?"

"Why? How?" said Martha, too stunned to argue.

"You take what she gives you," said Fowles; "but none of you see what you've got amongst you. You don't love saints or

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

angels; you expect them to give all and need nothing. Well, Ruth's a girl; only she's braver than any girl I've ever dreamed of: she's the sort of woman a man can conquer himself for, because if he didn't he'd feel a coward. She's so brave that she makes the meanest sort of mind have faith. One wants to know what she knows; one knows it's worth knowing: one knows the things of this world don't count beside the things that she knows. I couldn't have asked any other woman in the world but her to come where I am now; but she only sees the real things, and all one's pride crumples into nothing. One can't hang it out before her; one is ashamed. Besides, she doesn't believe in it; she won't recognise it as belonging to you; she talks to you as if you hadn't an ugly side, and you find you're standing straight up, free. She gives you self-respect; she gives you something that's true. Why, I've been feeling what you said about serving people; that's how she sees it: only she stands the test. You say these things, but it's only talk. Ruth means every word."

"I do mean it. How dare you! I'm sorry," said Martha, too shaken to think,

## IN THE GARDEN

much less speak, intelligibly. She felt immeasurably abashed and small and far away, as if she had opened her eyes to find herself in another plane from that where people whom she had been pitying moved. Fowles and Ruth! Ruth had seemed colourless; Fowles' character, in Martha's stern eyes, had been weak. But now, what beings were emerging? Heroic, loyal, brave, warm-hearted!

"Oh, I really didn't know," cried Martha, and dropped the basket to stretch out her hands pell-mell through the tangle. "I am sorry; I do see; I'm *honestly* glad!"

"My dear girl, I know you are. Why, I owe everything to you and Michael. Do you think I'll ever forget what Michael's been?" said Fowles, meeting Martha more than half way. "Oh, look at the mulberries. Now I've got to come round!"

"Does Mrs. Keene know?" asked Martha, when they were picking up the fruit in a cave of green boughs.

"No," said Fowles; "there's no need to tell things to her. She knows pretty well; and one sees things just by being with her. It's like having a bath of quiet light: one comes out strong and clear."

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Can I tell Michael?" said Martha.

"Yes, if you want to," Fowles replied. "At least, I don't expect Ruth would mind, but I don't know. I didn't mean to tell you, only I had to. You'll have to write and tell Ruth. She must know you know, and we don't write: we aren't allowed to. She has an idea that if we contain our souls in patience, your respected parents will awake to my desirability."

"I'm sure they would if they knew you as well as we do," said Martha, with flattering earnestness.

"They don't know me at all," said Fowles. "What concept they have formed of me, I really do not like to think."

"Why don't you boldly go and see father?" said Martha. "His bark is worse than his bite. He makes a great show of keeping up his prejudices, because he feels it's inconsistent to let go, but they're not deeply rooted. If one leaves him alone, he forgets, and drops them unconsciously."

"I suppose your sister's hoping he'll drop this one," said Fowles. The fruit was collected now, and he held back the bushes so that Martha could pass through.

"I must speak to father," said Martha,

## IN THE GARDEN

half to herself. "But I'll wait till I go home. One couldn't write it; and it won't hurt you to wait."

Fowles was making his way across the border, and did not hear this last remark. Mr. Keene was coming down the path, and they both went forward to meet him.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE DISHONOURED CHEQUE

“**R**EGULAR summer,” said Mrs. Stubbins. “Every one’s saying they don’t remember such a spring. Yes, I’ll send up everything at once, sir ; Tommy’s in from school. He was going up to Mrs. Harvey’s with a cheque. Such a turn as I’ve had. Perhaps you can tell me what it means if you wouldn’t mind looking.”

Mrs. Stubbins threw open her till and extracted a cheque with her customary briskness. The shop was pleasantly redolent of groceries ; gay cards and labels made the shelves and counter cheerful. From the low window one looked into the tree-shaded market-place. Mr. Spence held out his hand in his judicial manner.

“Certainly,” said he. “What’s the matter ? ”

“Why, it’s a most peculiar thing,” said Mrs. Stubbins. “Miss Harvey brought me this cheque about a week ago. There was a

## THE DISHONOURED CHEQUE

little trouble about endorsing it, I remember ; she'd forgotten to do so, and I had to run down half the street. Still, when that was done it seemed regular. Anyhow I'd cashed it, though I only managed to do so with my sweet money, which I keep separate because of the coppers, for I don't always have seven pounds in the middle of the week."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Spence. "Let me see the cheque."

"I was just coming to that," said Mrs. Stubbins. "I paid it in on Saturday as usual, and if it didn't come back this afternoon, with 'Account withdrawn' stamped on it, and a note from my bank to say it was discredited. I take it that means I've paid seven pounds for nothing."

"Impossible! There's some mistake," said Mr. Spence, almost as brilliant as the canisters. "There must be some mistake." He was gazing at the undeniable inscription on the back; then, turning it over, his eyes fell on the signature.

"Why, where did this come from?" said he.

"You see, it's dated June," said Mrs. Stubbins, leaning over the counter in the excitement of the incident. "That's nine months old—well, more. Miss Harvey said

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

she'd found it in her bag, and as she wanted money thought it might as well be cashed. I don't know rightly who's responsible. It doesn't seem right as I should have to lose, and me a widow."

"Of course not, of course not," said Mr. Spence, fumbling at his pockets; "I shall see that you get a cheque at once. I haven't my book, I fear; oh yes, I have. You shall certainly not suffer. I'll give you one of mine in return for this. That will put you right."

"It's very kind of you, sir, but I hope you won't be put to any loss, nor Miss Harvey," said Mrs. Stubbins. "She couldn't get the money by suing? It's punishable, isn't it? I'm sure I've heard of cases in the courts."

"Oh, it may be merely an oversight; in fact, in this case, it is. I know all about the signatory," answered Mr. Spence, quickly. "Accounts are sometimes transferred to another bank, and unrepresented cheques forgotten. There's no need for any talk about it. Mrs. Harvey would be very annoyed if there was."

"Well, I couldn't help asking for advice," said Mrs. Stubbins, rosy in her turn, "from one or two I thought might know. You



## THE DISHONOURED CHEQUE

must admit, sir, it looked peculiar. Seven pounds takes a lot of earning."

"You will find my cheque will be honoured, Mrs. Stubbins," said Mr. Spence, with immense aloofness, and stalked out of the shop in the argeeable knowledge that a scandal of the fullest Amesbury dimensions had started. Dollie again! Really, it would have been almost preferable if she had stayed in London. Her disgrace there was comparatively unimportant. The all-engrossing puzzle of the situation lay in the dishonoured signature. Mr. Spence had recognised the curious foreign handwriting directly he set eyes on "Cyril Fowles." Now how, in the name of all that was tolerable, had Dollie received a cheque from this particular source? The more Mr. Spence investigated clues and probabilities, the more impossible solution seemed. By the time he reached the drive of the Harveys' house, he was fuming with curiosity and irritation.

A glimmer of purple caught his eye as he came round the corner; Dollie was sitting on the steps that led to a disused avenue. The low yew hedge of an Italian garden opened at each end, so that Dollie appeared in a charming frame, with the elm trees rising above and beyond her and her thin silk gown

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

falling in effective folds upon the stone. She was looking through a lady's paper in a languid fashion; and though she had raised her eyes as Mr. Spence came into sight, she affected not to see him and perused the pages studiously until he was close up to her. The coolness was mutual.

"How do you do?" said Mr. Spence; "Better, I hope?"

"Oh, I suppose so," said Dollie, not attempting to conceal her lack of interest in her uncle. "I think mother's in the house—she's not anywhere in this direction, for I've been here all the afternoon."

"I have not called to see your mother," said Mr. Spence, and then added "at the moment," in a way that made Dollie put down her magazine.

"Oh!" said she. She was still somewhat weak and shaky, and her face looked pale against her purple gown.

"I have called about a cheque that Mrs. Stubbins cashed for you last week," Mr. Spence continued, noting that the magazine dropped to the ground upon this information. "It has been returned to her, dishonoured."

"Dishonoured!" said Dollie, deadly white now to the lips.

## THE DISHONoured CHEQUE

"I have set the matter right as far as Mrs. Stubbins is concerned," said Mr. Spence, who was considering Dollie's agitation highly incriminating. "I gave her one of my cheques, to avert, indeed, a painful scene. The cheque has been returned with the words 'Account withdrawn,' so that if we are to recover this money, the signatee will have to be written to."

"Oh yes, that's all right," gasped Dollie. "He's a friend of mine; one of my greatest friends. In fact, I know how it's happened: he's left London, and has probably opened an account with a new bank. Thank you very much though. If you'll let me have the cheque I'll send it back and get another."

Mr. Spence did not give up the cheque however. Setting down his stick he established himself on the steps some little way from Dollie.

"The matter cannot be dismissed like this," said he, and Dollie's hands tightened on the stone. She held herself up with a desperate effort. Her heart had begun to beat with sickening rapidity. The will-power was difficult to summon now.

"You say this Mr. Fowles is a friend of yours: one of your greatest friends," said Mr. Spence. "May I ask how long you have known him?"

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"He's one of my London friends," said Dollie.

"We understood you had none," said Mr. Spence. "Your mother and Ruth, indeed all of us, had the impression you devoted yourself entirely to the Industry."

"That's where I met him," said Dollie, to whom many unpleasant recollections were beginning to return.

"You mean he was a customer?" said Mr. Spence. "He came in to buy?"

"Yes; that's it," said Dollie, seizing at an apparent opportunity. "He is a fashionable artist of great influence and very wealthy; and he admired the work and used to help me about business matters, and so we became friends."

"A fashionable artist of great influence!" said Mr. Spence, raising his eyebrows with the air of one who received novel information. "Indeed? The Mr. Cyril Fowles that I know is in a shop."

"Yes, now. He lost his money," stumbled Dollie. "Did you say you know him?"

"I have been in communication with him; I happened to recognise his signature," said Mr. Spence, preserving an aloofness which made Dollie tremble. "But the Mr. Fowles of my experience is not a desirable friend for

## THE DISHONOURD CHEQUE

a young lady. May I ask what you mean by friend? Did you ever see him outside your showroom?"

"Occasionally," faltered Dollie.

"May I ask where?" asked Mr. Spence.

"We met sometimes at the same restaurant," said Dollie. "I had to dine out now and then."

"And you mean he came up and spoke to you," said Mr. Spence, fixing awful eyes upon the witness.

"Yes," said Dollie, after a minute or two's juggling with her conscience. "Yes. I really couldn't help myself. Restaurants are free to all."

"Did you make many other friends amongst your customers?" Mr. Spence inquired.

"Oh no," cried Dollie, waking up to the interpretation of her evidence. "Of course I shouldn't have dreamed of speaking to him, only he was a friend of Ruth's. They met at the showroom, too."

"Indeed? I was given to understand they met at Michael's studio," said Mr. Spence.

"Yes, after; or perhaps before. I know they did meet at the showroom when I was out and that they went off together," Dollie repeated. "Because Ruth had promised to

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

wait till I came back. I should never have gone out with a stranger. I knew him very well before I consented to go out with him."

"Go out with him," said Mr. Spence. "I understood your meetings were by chance at restaurants."

"They were by chance on my part," said Dollie, now almost unconscious of the untruths she was telling in her mad desire to defend herself from such inquisitorial judgment.

"You mean to imply the meetings were not accidental on his?" said Mr. Spence.

"You have no right to question me," gasped Dollie. "What business is it of yours? I am not going to betray Mr. Fowles for what wasn't his fault. People can't help liking people."

"The inference being that he liked you," said her uncle. "As a matter of fact, it is my business to find out your relations. I need not give you my reasons, but I must ask one thing. Have you received a definite proposal from this person, or were his attentions merely desultory?"

"I don't know what you mean by desultory," said Dollie, clutching at any delay. She could not decide which answer would extricate her best. An awful memory had returned. She

## THE DISHONoured CHEQUE

had never sent the 'stock' to Mr. Fowles. She had completely forgotten the details of the transaction. The cheque had come to hand after an interval of months, and she had hailed its discovery as a direct interposition of Providence, for she was in debt as usual. No allowance would ever be sufficient for Dolly's ventures.

"Was he serious?" said Mr. Spence sharply. "You know perfectly well what I mean. Was the man obviously trifling with you, or did he treat you with respect?"

"Oh yes," cried Dollie. "He looked up to me. He had always been idle until he knew me, and my example made him ashamed of himself. Of course I didn't feel anything but pity for him; the Industry took all my thought. But still, the silent example of character makes people want to change, and I can't be sorry for the time I gave to him, even if I'm to be blamed and misjudged. I know it's through me and through me alone he was able to stand on his feet when the crash came."

Dollie was weeping openly. Once more she was a heroine, condemned and isolated, but magnificently brave!

"Well, I never!" thought Mr. Spence.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"The man must be a maniac. Does he go round, being helped? He's taken exactly the same line with Ruth."

His eyes fell on the cheque again.

"So he used to come in and buy things?" said Mr. Spence.

"Yes; his father was alive and he had heaps of money," answered Dollie, recuperating slightly through the emotional turn the conversation had taken.

"This cheque's dated June 4th," said Mr. Spence. "His father died in May, surely. I remember Martha sent the news on Ruth's birthday; your mother said it was bad luck to send such news in a birthday letter. What was this cheque for?"

"The bedspread," said Dollie, now desperate.

"But Ruth sold that," said Mr. Spence. "She told us."

"Oh yes, so she did; this must be for something else," said Dollie, putting both hands to her head.

"Did Mr. Fowles buy that?" thundered Mr. Spence, aghast at the similarity of Mr. Fowles' tactics.

"Yes," said Dollie. "I've really forgotten; I don't remember; you're making me ill." She was longing to faint: if only she could



## THE DISHONoured CHEQUE

lose consciousness and thus show up her uncle's persecution. Should she close her eyes and drop? If she did, however, her uncle would be left in sole possession of the field. She could hear him explaining to her mother! No; fainting would not be diplomatic in its consequences.

"I am not going to be silenced," said Mr. Spence. "This cheque has been the means of uncovering something I am profoundly grateful to know. Your mother too must be informed; she needs to have her eyes opened to the risks you have been running. I don't say that you knew: you are too inexperienced, and, if I may say so, too vain to estimate character. I can tell you one thing; your great friend is nothing more nor less than a designing adventurer who has been trying to worm his way into a wealthy family through any means."

"That's not true," flashed Dollie; and was erect once more. "Do you want to know what that cheque was for? Well, I'll tell you. It was for my rent. The landlady was going to turn me out because I couldn't pay. Mr. Fowles had lost his money, but he didn't hesitate; he was a friend!"

"Then you have been telling me a string of lies?" gasped Mr. Spence.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"No," said Dollie. "Only what you made me say. You make up the lies; your suspicions are the lies. Then you stare at me and shout, and I answer what you suspect, because I'm afraid. But when it comes to calling the one friend I had an adventurer, it's too ridiculous! I'll tell you another thing: he took me out to dinner once a fortnight, and let me eat as much as I wanted; it was the one good meal I had. I was starving, and he fed me. There! He thought I was going to be homeless, and he gave me the money. I said I'd send him some work, but I forgot; and anyhow, he didn't want it."

"The lies!" said Mr. Spence, feebly holding to his stick and turning his head from side to side as if in quest of a bolt from heaven.

"I told you another," said Dollie, now exalted beyond fear, and indeed rather revelling in her burst of heroism. "I said his intentions were serious because you gave no choice between that and 'desultory'; and I thought serious sounded best for Mr. Fowles. But he wasn't serious in anything but being kind. He saw I was lonely and hungry, and was making a hard fight; and he was Christianly kind. I suppose you don't know what that means. You can't take it in.

## THE DISHONoured CHEQUE

You can't believe in good motives. You're always looking for bad ones."

"I look for the truth," said Mr. Spence, gasping like a fish. "I confess I'm still aghast. Never have I heard such lies! And there you stand, calmly owning to them."

"I'm not calm!" said Dollie tearfully. "Not in my inside. I'm furious that you should make me tell the lies. You ask for them. You insist on getting them. But I shall tell mother the truth, and she'll give you back the money. She'll be as glad as I that Mr. Fowles hasn't had to pay it. I never thought when I cashed the cheque; I seemed to have forgotten. Oh, oh, oh! fetch mother. Please fetch mother. I c-c-can't control myself!"

"Hush, hush!" said Mr. Spence, round-eyed with anger and astonishment. "You're an hysterical self-willed girl, with no sense of truth. You've always brought disgrace on us. Will you sit up and attend to me?"

"No," cried Dollie. "If you won't fetch mother, I shall faint; I'm nearly unconscious now! You're making me fearfully ill."

"Very good thing too," said Mr. Spence, rising thoroughly impenitent. "I'm glad your conduct brings something on your head."

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

Never, in the whole course of my professional career, have I had such an experience."

Mr. Spence strode off; the weapon he had hoped for had turned into a broken reed. Blame Dollie as he would, there was no mistaking truth when it at last appeared. Her reproaches also had not fallen on deaf ears. Mr. Spence, unclouded by his prejudices, was a kind-hearted, fair-minded man. Dollie had always been a difficult problem, and their last interview had done nothing to improve the situation.

Moreover, Dollie's confession had brought a buried subject vividly to mind. Only last night Mr. and Mrs. Spence had been congratulating themselves on the "natural death" of Fowles' proposal. Now Dollie had threatened to speak of him to her mother, and most of the village would be talking of the incident of the cheque. At any moment his name might fall upon Ruth's ears as the hero of a drama which a tender-hearted girl would not think discreditable.

Mr. Spence walked gloomily along, wishing he had closed the matter with the substitution of his cheque. Buried subjects were best left in oblivion.

When he lifted his eyes to see Martha ad-

## THE DISHONoured CHEQUE

vancing smilingly to meet him, he had difficulty in resuming a natural expression.

"Well, this is like old times, isn't it," said Martha, coming up all unconscious of a storm-centre. "Michael and Ruth and Bob and Jock are playing tennis, and I thought it was a good chance to slip off and come and meet you."

"Very kind of you, my dear," replied her father.

"I've been wanting a talk for the last week," said Martha, falling into a confidential pace.

"Only I never could get you alone. Now you will be calm and reasonable, won't you?"

"I am not aware I am ever anything else," said Mr. Spence, becoming somewhat choleric in complexion.

"I meant, because I'm going to ask a favour," said Martha. "And I'm afraid it *will* need a little conquering of your prejudices."

"I have none," said Mr. Spence.

"Well, we'll say general prejudice," Martha answered soothingly. "Of course I meant general prejudice, for I know you'd like Mr. Fowles; it will be the people who don't know him personally who——"

"Mr. Fowles!" gasped Mr. Spence, wondering if he heard aright.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Oh, I see you know," said Martha, pressing her father's arm assuringly. "That's rather a comfort, because there won't be so much to tell you. Still, I don't yet quite know how much you do know; I mean, I don't know if you realise how deep it's gone? Ruth tells me you never speak of the matter."

When a satisfactorily interred skeleton is suddenly discovered to be indecently exposed, and indeed flauntingly careering in the full front of the stage, a little indignation cannot be wondered at.

"I should think not," said Mr. Spence. "I should think not! Do you mean to say Ruth speaks of it to *you*?"

"Father, dear, I'm the only one she can speak to," replied Martha—"except Jock: I believe Jock knows."

"Oh, does she?" said Mr. Spence. "And what do you all know?"

"How deeply it's gone," said Martha, disclosing sympathy in every accent. "I should never have given Ruth credit for such firmness. All the opposition hasn't made her budge an inch. And yet she has shown such patience. They don't even write. I think it's wonderful. Now, father dear, the year is so nearly up. You won't make them suffer

## THE DISHONoured CHEQUE

any longer, will you ? They've both behaved so splendidly."

"Are you inferring that I have not ?" said Mr. Spence.

"Well, father dear, I think you've judged a little quickly," murmured Martha. "If you'd only consent to meet Mr. Fowles, you'd see your feeling about his position was absurd. No one could mistake him for anything but what he is. It's too ridiculous to be talking as if Ruth were marrying beneath her. As a matter of fact, if they hadn't lost their money, Mrs. Fowles would have expected a much more brilliant match than Ruth."

"Indeed," said Mr. Spence. "I can assure you I can dispense with Mrs. Fowles' opinions as to the value of my daughter."

"I don't attach any value to them," said Martha. "I'm only trying to point out that directly one begins to talk of position, one becomes illogical. The only thing that matters is people's worth and fitness for each other; and both Ruth and Mr. Fowles are suited. And the way they found out and went straight to each other through all obstacles, I consider wonderful, and shows how out of the common they both are !"

"May I ask if you are empowered to ad-

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

dress me on behalf of either Ruth or Mr. Fowles?" said Mr. Spence, no longer paternal.

"Not exactly; but I've talked the matter over with both of them," said Martha, trying to preserve a dignified air, but feeling something of the old fear of her father. "And as they are both so miserable, I was sure you'd like to know."

"Why should you think Ruth's misery gives me delight?" said Mr. Spence, pushing back his gate with a trembling hand. "On what ground do you bring that accusation? Have I ever denied either of you anything that I thought would bring you happiness?"

"Father!" said Martha aghast.

"I have worked all my life to bring you all up comfortably; I have found the money for every activity you wished to pursue; I have spared nothing for your pleasure or your good. And now, when a proposal comes from a man of whom none of you know anything——"

"Oh, father!" Martha broke in.

"I repeat, of whom none of you know anything—none of you," affirmed Mr. Spence, with quadrupled emphasis, "you turn on me and accuse me of heartless cruelty; and not content with talking me over amongst your-



## THE DISHONoured CHEQUE

selves, go chattering to other strangers. Yes, I repeat, other *strangers*, even if they've wormed their way into the family. I tell you I know much more about this Fowles than you do. Do you know he scraped acquaintance with Dollie over the counter, and took her out to dinner regularly? And do you think I'd hand Ruth over to that sort of man? Never! Never! I'm not a girl, my dear, to be taken in by flattery and compliments."

"Oh, father, he's most rude. He's always had that reputation," cried Martha in despair.

"Exactly. A boor. I saw that from his letter. A monstrous letter! A mass of impudence!" said Mr. Spence.

They were passing the sunk fence which separated the meadows from the lawn. The cedars shadowed them; the house loomed through the creeping dusk.

"I'd no idea it was as bad as this," said Martha, striving in one last appeal. "You are misjudging him though. If you would only see him and talk to him——"

"Not another word," said Mr. Spence. "While you are staying in my house, Martha, please understand there is one name that is never mentioned in it; one subject that is

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

not alluded to. I mean to preserve the peace of my home intact."

"But the subject's there," said Martha. "You can't have peace when everybody's miserable, even if you don't mention what everybody's thinking of."

"There I differ from you," answered Mr. Spence. "I have the right to control and rule over my home, and if I forbid the voicing of a certain subject it is because I see farther than any of you and know the wisdom of my method."

Mr. Spence ascended the steps and disappeared into his study.

"Is Miss Ruth in?" asked Martha of a maid, and receiving an affirmative, went up to her sister's room.

Ruth was sewing by the last light through the window. Martha closed the door and stood against it.

"Oh, Ruth, I don't know what we'll do!" said she. "I've just had it all out with father, and he's adamant. I don't know what he's heard, but he says he knows much more of Mr. Fowles than any of us; and brings a charge of scraping acquaintance with Dollie. I'm almost sure father said he took her out to dinner. I know it's untrue, be-

## THE DISHONoured CHEQUE

cause Dollie's the sort of person who bores him to death, and Mr. Fowles would never do anything that didn't amuse him. The worst of it was, I couldn't tell that to father. One of us must have it out with Dollie ; she's been making out things in her usual manner."

"It's quite true," said Ruth. "Mr. Fowles did take her out, every fortnight. He told me. But he did it because she was hungry."

"And father's got it all wrong," said Martha.

"All wrong," repeated Ruth.

The room was growing dark ; outside, the autumn mist was rising from the meadows, white and ghostly. Ruth remained by the window, her figure almost lost in shadow.

"What are we to do ?" repeated Martha, slipping into a sitting position on the bed. "He's hopeless, Ruth ; he really is. I've never seen him like this ; never !"

Ruth did not answer. Martha clasped her knees and thought and thought. There must be a way out, because troubles always yielded when the way through dawned. But in this situation darkness clouded every vista.

"What are you going to do ?" said she.

"The year isn't up," was Ruth's answer.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE PROMISED LAND

“**D**o you know where Ruth is?” called Mrs. Spence. Mr. Spence was strolling up the garden walk, and she came to meet him, buttoning her glove.

The grass and daisies were still glistening in the deep shade underneath the beeches; on the long walk the sweet-peas offered their first harvest; heavy showers had fallen in the night, and moisture covered leaf and flower and bough. The morning was cloudy, and Mrs. Spence had donned her coat and skirt and thick tan gloves.

“I’m going in the car to Skeffingfield about those chairs,” she volunteered as she came up. “I thought Ruth was with you.”

“No; I haven’t seen her since breakfast,” said Mr. Spence, accompanying his wife as she turned back to the house. “Hasn’t she gone down to the Industry?”

“No; she said last night she wouldn’t

## THE PROMISED LAND

be going there this morning; that's why I thought she might as well come with me," said Mrs. Spence. "She wasn't in her room nor anywhere downstairs that I could see."

"She must be somewhere," said Mr. Spence.

Some months had elapsed since the talk with Martha, during which time Ruth had pursued her duties in her usual manner. Yet things had not been quite the same; Mr. Spence was conscious of a subtle atmospheric disturbance—an unsettled feeling which had remained after Martha and Michael's visit was at an end.

And then, some time ago—when he was beginning to forget the uncomfortable business—Ruth had brought it up again by reminding him the year's probation had expired, and he had to go through a scene of almost equal painfulness. Not quite. Ruth was quieter, more sensible. He too had been firmer. Mr. Fowles was to be put down, once and for all, from the social plane on which he was trying presumptuously to clamber. Ruth's suggestion that her father should visit Coombe was dismissed as being sure to lead to dangerous and unprofitable consequences. Better, far better, to announce his decision now in a way that could not possibly be mis-

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

understood. If Mr. Spence blamed himself for anything in the matter, it was that he had been weak a year ago, and had left the matter, in a measure, open.

The intangible restlessness had not vanished as completely as it should have done when the verdict had been given and accepted. Ruth had looked paler, and he had fancied, lately, thinner. Her good-night kiss last night was oddly touching in its wistfulness.

"It will do her good to go for a run," said Mr. Spence, with an unconscious sigh. "I think that Industry's beginning to tell upon her spirits; or perhaps she's missing Martha since she's been. Dear, dear, it does seem strange to think that this is no longer Martha's home!"

"Yes; I was thinking how empty the house felt only just now when I was looking for Ruth," agreed his wife. "I must say I'm glad summer's here. We must give a garden party soon; that will brighten her up. Dear, dear, to think it's July. How time flies!"

"Yes; we're getting old," assented her husband, with another sigh.

"I feel as young as I ever did," said Mrs. Spence buoyantly. "A good deal younger than when I had Martha on my hands. Oh,

## THE PROMISED LAND

dear. Do you remember how we used to worry about Martha? I lay awake night after night, fearing the time when she'd be a great painter and look down on us. What trouble I'd have been saved if I could only have known then that she'd do nothing after all but marry a nice fellow like Michael!"

"My dear, you always wanted to be the mother of a genius," said Mr. Spence. "You're inconsistent."

"Still, I don't know that the best thing for a woman isn't to be comfortably married," murmured Mrs. Spence. "I do wish something of that kind would turn up for Ruth."

"Funny! I was thinking so only this morning," said Mr. Spence. "I don't know that anything would give me more relief and pleasure than to see Ruth safely married. If she does become engaged I shall press forward the date, even if I have to help; there is no reason why I shouldn't do something for the girls. I couldn't help feeling that when I heard Martha talking of her wretched little cottage."

"Yes, dear, but Martha is very different from Ruth. She has always had peculiar ideas," said Mrs. Spence. "I couldn't help feeling *that* as I was listening! I suppose it's

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

the wildness of genius that makes her content to live without a proper servant, but I must say it makes one doubt how money would be spent if it were given. Now, Ruth has always been sensible."

"Oh yes; she is amenable to reason," said Mr. Spence, feeling he had grounds for congratulation in this matter. "You see she has never been away from home except for the briefest visits. It makes all the difference when one can keep a girl entirely under one's control. It was a great mistake to let Martha go. She has never really been one of the family since. Independence must weaken the natural respect for the authority of one's parents."

"Ye-es," said Mrs. Spence, rather doubtfully. "Martha never had much of that, though. Don't you remember the trouble we had with her governesses? Why, when she was nine you said she was completely out of hand. You forget now, dear, but you never could do anything with Martha. I always had to tackle her; and when she grew up I couldn't force her to pay calls. I had quite enough of that after the first time I'd made her go against her will."

"Still, London freedom was rather like the fire for a burnt child," said Mr. Spence.



## THE PROMISED LAND

"Well, I don't know," meditated Mrs. Spence. "She came home different: she was much more dutiful the last two years before she married than I've ever known her."

"That was the effect of her engagement," said Mr. Spence authoritatively. "She'd met Michael in London, and though she wasn't actually engaged, they had probably some sort of understanding. She'd never have come home if they hadn't."

"It's funny how every girl one knows now wants to get away from home," said Mrs. Spence. "Look at Dollie!"

"As a Christian and a gentleman, I would rather not," said Mr. Spence, reddening uncontrollably. "You would oblige me by not mentioning her in my presence."

"I never liked Dollie, but I do think she's improving," said Mrs. Spence. "She's so much nicer to her mother."

"I should think so, after the infatuated way in which Margaret upholds her," stuttered Mr. Spence. "If she had any regard for Dollie's training, she would have read her a lesson about that cheque that would have impressed the need of truth on Dollie for her lifetime. Instead of which her mother

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

writes to a designing rogue about whom she knows nothing—absolutely nothing, except what redounds to his discredit—and thanks him! Positively thanks him for his kindness! The next thing we shall hear is that Dollie is engaged to him. If that comes off I shall leave the neighbourhood; I will not receive him into my family by any channel through which he may try to creep.”

“But, dear, there isn’t the faintest prospect,” said his wife.

“You don’t know as much as I do,” said Mr. Spence. “What do you think has made me take a stand that must have seemed prejudiced and bigoted, and even harsh to all my family, including Ruth? I was only at liberty to give the reason of the man’s position; but the real objection is my knowledge of his character. I have evidence of an incontrovertible nature that he never entertained serious affection or respect for Ruth. He is a butterfly, a philanderer, a man who goes up to girls in restaurants and scrapes acquaintance with them! I’m sure I am the last person to object to any one for lack of means. As I said, I am in a position to make that all right, provided the man I chose for Ruth is worth supporting.”

## THE PROMISED LAND

"Ruth must have some choice in the matter," put in Mrs. Spence.

"Ruth! What does she know of men?" said Mr. Spence. "You know Ruth's simplicity and inexperience! How can she possibly be in a position to judge for herself? Absurd! I trust and know she will be ready to be guided when a suitable applicant appears."

"I sometimes wonder if Ruth hasn't more character than we think," said Mrs. Spence. "Lately, I've noticed Ruth never gives up her opinions: she only stops forcing them on people who don't want them. But she doesn't alter. I'm not as confident as you that she'll give up this Mr. Fowles."

"My dear, I shall never give my consent," said Mr. Spence. They had reached the door; the car was waiting, and Mrs. Spence called to the maid who was carrying out her wrap.

"Do you know where Miss Ruth is?"

"She's gone, ma'am," said the maid, surprised.

"Gone!" said the Spences, coming up. "Gone where?"

"To the station, didn't you say?" said the maid, addressing the chauffeur.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Yes; I passed her when I brought the petrol," said the chauffeur. "She was turning in to the ticket-office. I'd no idea she was going, sir, or I'd have taken down her bag."

"Yes; Canning was put out when he found Miss Ruth had carried it herself," put in the maid. "Her suit-case, too. She must have packed it, but I'd had no instructions, ma'am."

"Oh! Oh yes!" said Mr. Spence.

"We'd better go down to the station," faltered Mrs. Spence. "She must have gone on."

"Yes; she must have gone on," echoed Mr. Spence. Appearances must be kept up. The servants' suspicion and astonishment were thinly veiled by the mask of deference.

Mr. Spence went in for his coat, and came back and ascended to the seat beside his wife. Then the car groaned and moved and whizzed off.

"We can ask at the station," said Mr. Spence in a low murmur. "The man will tell us."

"Yes; but she's gone," said Mrs. Spence.

"Hush, hush! Don't let any one see that anything's the matter. I shall go after her; I shall wire to the police," said Mr. Spence.

## THE PROMISED LAND

"My dear, she's of age. We have no legal control," said Mrs. Spence. "It seems too dreadful to think we haven't, of our own child."

"Calm yourself, calm yourself! Here's Mrs. Fontenay," whispered Mr. Spence. Both smiled and bowed.

"What will people say!" burst from Mrs. Spence. "Oh, what will people say! Oh, if we're not in time!"

"We shall find her; somehow we'll get to her," said Mr. Spence between clenched teeth.

"But if she refuses to come back?" persisted Mrs. Spence. "We can't force her."

"We can appeal to her feelings," said Mr. Spence.

"I thought you'd done that," cried Ruth's mother. "Oh, how could she, our little Ruth!"

"She's not responsible. I'll never believe that she's responsible," said Mr. Spence in a dull voice; and then sat silent till the car climbed up the hill and stopped before the station entrance.

"I'll go in," said he. "One's enough."

Mrs. Spence waited therefore, half hoping that there had been some mistake. The

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

possibility of flight was too dreadful to admit, and yet something told her Ruth had gone. The blankness that death brings encompassed everything.

When her husband came out she was answered by the sight of his demeanour.

"Well?" said she.

"Coombe," said Mr. Spence; and addressed the chauffeur. "Have you plenty of petrol?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then get along as quickly as you can. You know the road. You took the young ladies."

"Yes, sir."

"Are you going now?" Mrs. Spence leaned forward agitatedly.

"Yes," said Mr. Spence, taking his seat beside her, and then they had started off.

"There's no train for two hours," he explained. "We shall be there by then."

"What do you propose to do?" asked Mrs. Spence.

"Bring her home."

"If she won't come, though?"

Mr. Spence compressed his lips and did not deign to answer.

"It may have happened," faltered Mrs.

## THE PROMISED LAND

Spence. "Her plans were all thought out. I have a feeling we shall get there when it's over. Oh, to think that Ruth may be being married now without any one belonging to her! Our Ruth, who's always been so loving and unselfish and has tried her best to please us always!"

"She's hypnotised," repeated Mr. Spence.

Mrs. Spence sniffed, and patted her eyes with her handkerchief while the car shot on.

"I don't think we're justified in assuming that," she murmured presently. "She's being ordinary, that's all."

"Ordinary!" gasped Mr. Spence. "Ordinary, to run off with a man of whom she knows absolutely nothing. Are *you* crazed too?"

"No!" said Mrs. Spence, bristling a little. "I'm trying to be fair. Ruth has always been a perfect daughter: she's never said a sharp word to us all her life and has waited on us since she was a tiny tot. And now she's fallen in love and is putting the young man before us, as every girl does when she is in love. If my people had been disagreeable about you, I'd have eloped, I'm sure."

"The case was entirely different," said Mr. Spence. "There was nothing your

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

people could object to in me, and so you were justified in marrying me. Ruth is in no doubt as to how we feel about the undesirability of this man's character. She knows we think her future life will be nothing but misery with such a man. That's where she's being undutiful."

"Yes," said Mrs. Spence, somewhat uncertainly. "But as a matter of fact, dear, I never let you know, but all my family were not in favour of our marriage. I won't tell you which member was so positive I should be unhappy, but it was most disagreeably insisted on. You see, dear, they didn't understand your emphatic way of stating your opinions came from your legal training. I knew: I always knew; but my family only judged from the outside. Even on my wedding day my poor mother begged me to draw back."

"How absurd!" snorted Mr. Spence. "How perfectly absurd!"

"Yes, indeed. There couldn't have been a happier couple than we've been on the whole," said Mrs. Spence. "And of course after, when they really knew you, they all grew to like you very much. You must remember everything was very different then:



## THE PROMISED LAND

you hadn't retired, and we didn't live at the Manor; though nothing like that affected me. I never thought about your circumstances; and though I loved my family most dearly, I wasn't influenced when it came to loving you. You forget how independent love makes people feel."

"I certainly can still see no analogy between our case and this," maintained Mr. Spence. "I knew your family; I visited you at your house; your father and I had a properly conducted interview."

"Oh yes, father was always fair," said Mrs. Spence.

"But how has this fellow behaved?" cried Mr. Spence.

"I can't help wishing you had seen him," said Mrs. Spence. "He did write and ask."

"After he had obtained Ruth's pledge," snapped Mr. Spence.

"You'd proposed to me before you saw papa," said Mrs. Spence, with some heat.

"If you hadn't found out what I thought first, I shouldn't have looked at you."

"I did not set about my business in a secret, underhand way like this man has done," said Mr. Spence.

"You always have told me you wanted to

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

propose that night when we slipped out after dinner and went round the kitchen garden," said Mrs. Spence; "only you were too nervous. It was only because it was such an opportunity that you asked me in the drawing-room that afternoon you called when nobody was in. And we used to meet in all sorts of places, after that. Don't you remember how I used to slip through the peach-house into that little fir-grove behind? Of course we didn't tell our people everything; or, for that matter, anything. I'd have no more told my family if I'd met you by accident, as Ruth told you when she met Mr. Fowles in that shop——" Mrs. Spence stopped again to dab her eyes.

"You would hand Ruth over, then?" said Mr. Spence, staring at the back of the chauffeur in dazed infuriation.

"She's handed herself," said Mrs. Spence. "The point is now, how are we going to behave about it? I confess, I feel we have driven her to it, cruelly; yes, cruelly."

"How would you have had me behave?" said Mr. Spence, after a moment's pause in which to collect his scattered faculties. "What was I to do, when I got a letter from a man of whom I know absolutely nothing?"

## THE PROMISED LAND

"Oh, don't say that again; I'm sick of it!" said Mrs. Spence sharply. "That we still know nothing of him is our fault and no one else's. He wanted to come and see you, and you could have inquired from the Keenes and Martha. There'd have been no difficulty in getting information if you'd wanted it."

"Oh!" said Mr. Spence, still suffering from the paralysing effects of the cataclysm. "Oh, indeed! And may I ask why you never mentioned this before?"

"I was hypnotised," said Mrs. Spence. "Your prejudices are so violent that unless one thinks, they seem reasonable. You see, I know you are sound in most things, and I get in the habit of accepting everything you say as right, until something dreadful happens like to-day."

For lack of an adequate reply Mr. Spence continued his survey of the chauffeur's back. Worlds were indeed falling. His self-respect was built upon his womenkind's allegiance; now were wife and daughters free and entertaining opinions about him? Impossible! He had always judged for them. It was his right to judge for them. He had the sole right of judgment upon any matter that concerned them.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Something dreadful has happened indeed," said Mr. Spence. "First my daughter turns on me; now you."

"This isn't a time to think about ourselves," said Mrs. Spence; "when Ruth is being married without a trousseau or a wedding present or a single thing for her new house. Why, the whole point of being married is starting with everything new. When I think of what we did for Martha, and how Michael came and stayed, and how everybody in Amesbury sent something, the church and the Industry, and the villagers—— Oh, oh, oh! And to think that Ruth's got nothing when she's done fifty times as much for everybody, and marrying a man who's got no people either, and no one to give them things; for his friends will be sure to take his changed position as an excuse."

"Ruth needs nothing from his friends," said Mr. Spence. "There's one thing you do know, and that is that I never let the man's income affect me. It was only the fact that I knew absolutely nothing about him. I think any father with a proper sense of duty and parental responsibility would have felt some qualms at entrusting his daughter to an entire stranger. Now if it had been a

## THE PROMISED LAND

man we knew, he mightn't have had a penny ! But Ruth had met him in London at a studio that didn't even belong to Michael."

"And at Martha's home," put in Mrs. Spence. "You forget they met the second time when he was staying at the Keenes'."

"And the third time, he proposed to her," said Mr. Spence. "Came down specially to do it."

"It looks as if he must be very much in love and know his own mind too," said Mrs. Spence. "There aren't many young men who'd want to undertake the responsibility of a wife when they were thrown upon the world as he was."

"The artistic temperament," said Mr. Spence.

"But he's in business," persisted Mrs. Spence. "And you know Ruth said he'd taken the position because he had to keep his mother. Lots of young men wouldn't have dreamed of doing that : they'd have gone on living on their friends till something that they liked turned up."

"Why couldn't you have thought of all these things before ?" repeated Mr. Spence, intensely irritated.

"Because I was foolish," said Mrs. Spence.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"I let myself be entirely influenced by your opinions. I admit the idea of a shop did seem rather dreadful: I don't say that I like it now; but I don't think his position, under the circumstances, is anything against Mr. Fowles: rather the contrary. And really, there's a great deal of nonsense in that prejudice. I expect it will go one day, like many others. Look how people used to think of governesses, once; yet nowadays girls are doing everything. Why, they're lady nurses. If we let girls do any sort of work and still be ladies, the next thing will be that we shall give the same privilege to young men."

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Spence.

"It's sense," said his wife. "And I'm going to stick to sense for the future. I know that Ruth does not deserve to be turned out of her home as if she were a servant in disgrace."

"Who turned her out?" cried Mr. Spence.

"We did, by not loving her," said Mrs. Spence, in a very queer voice.

"It was entirely my love for her that caused me to act as I did," said Mr. Spence.

"We resented her being taken from us by a man we didn't know and who wouldn't add any credit to the family," said Mrs. Spence.

## THE PROMISED LAND

"That's the truth, and I'm not going to cover it up. We've looked on Ruth as a child and belonging to us; and she's an independent person; and if we want to keep her love we must do as we would be done by. We shouldn't like Ruth to judge our friends before she'd even seen them, and say we weren't to have anything more to do with them."

"The case is different," said Mr. Spence. "Ruth is our daughter."

"Well, my dear, she must become an independent person some day," said her mother. "Just as we are! Now Martha's married we don't dream of interfering with her. Why shouldn't we respect a girl who's unmarried?"

"Because Martha has a husband who's responsible in my place," said Mr. Spence.

"Well, Ruth may have by now," said Mrs. Spence. "You don't mean to say you think this Mr. Fowles is better fitted to determine what Ruth is to think and do than she is herself?"

"Of course not!" thundered Mr. Spence. "It's due to him she's run away from us."

"Well, I'm not going to turn her off because of it," said Mrs. Spence, clenching her hands. "She's the same good, faithful, loving girl she's always been. Do you think I don't know Ruth? If she's gone off without any

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

of the preparations or the happiness that Martha had, it's our fault, and I feel we can't do enough to make up for it."

"You'd forgive them, then?" said Mr. Spence, more impersonally than his wife had ever hoped.

"Yes, even though you don't," she cried.

"When did I say I wouldn't?" said Mr. Spence, appealing to the glass in front of him.

"You have taken the point of view that all my actions are deliberate, whereas everybody occasionally acts on impulse. Not being a woman, I prefer to wait till I see Mr. Fowles before I form a judgment on him; but if, after sufficient evidence and consideration, he appears worthy, I shall not let his past presumption stand in the way of full acceptance. There is one thing on which I do pride myself, and that is, that I am absolutely free from prejudice."

"Isn't that the cathedral?" said Mrs. Spence. "Look, over those fields. Yes, it is. Oh, dear, I wish he'd go more quickly. We're creeping along."

"Can't you put on speed?" said Mr. Spence, putting his head round. "We have an appointment. Never mind! I'll pay a fine if necessary. Only get along."

So it came that Ruth and Fowles had com-



## THE PROMISED LAND

pany at their wedding-breakfast besides the Canon.

The simple meal was spread in Fowles' rooms, which looked on to a stone-flagged alley set with trees. The sitting-room was rather dark, but to Ruth and Fowles it was all the more of a retreat from the world that misjudged and would not listen.

They had been married by the Canon, and were sitting down to luncheon. Fowles had the day off; that was all.

And then, the door had opened on them, and Ruth was enfolded in her mother's arms and kissed and cried over in the most orthodox bridal fashion. Actually, her father was there too, and found no better remedy for an embarrassing situation appeared than to shake hands vigorously several times with every one, especially the Canon, who seemed in some mysterious way to be accepted as one of the bridegroom's family.

"Though you mustn't do it again," said Mrs. Spence, unintelligible with emotion. "You must never dream of doing such a thing again!"

"No," said Mr. Spence. "We shall see to that!"

"Oh, father, mother!" cried a happy bride.

## RUTH'S MARRIAGE

"Do you mean you'll ever forgive me? How beautiful!"

"You must take care of her," said Mr. Spence, with the air of formally handing over an invaluable possession.

"Oh, you must indeed," said Mrs. Spence. "But I'm sure you will. I saw directly I came in. You must forgive us, too."

"You will see!" said Mr. Spence, laying his hand on Fowles' shoulder. "It was a very difficult position to decide about some one of whom we knew absolutely——"

"But of whom we must know a good deal," said the Canon, with a twinkle in his eye as if the knowledge would be satisfactory.

Fowles did not answer: his mouth was quivering irresistibly. Then his eyes caught Ruth's.

"Dry ground!" he murmured.

"I know," said Ruth. "But then, it always is."

"Eh?" said Mr. Spence.

"Nothing," said Ruth, and kissed her father. "Only we feel as if we're in the promised land."